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PICCALILLI:

A Mixture.



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1



"Alardos looked surprised and pained"—p. 28.

PICCALILLY

BY

GILBERT

PERCY



GEORGE THOMAS

ILLUSTRATED BY

T. R. MACQUOID

AND

LONDON:

SAMPSON LOW SON AND CO.

MDCCCLXII

P I C C A L I L L I :

A M I X T U R E .

BY

G I L B E R T P E R C Y .

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE THOMAS AND T. R. MACQUOID.

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ENGRAVED BY EDMUND EVANS.

PICCOLI A MIXTURE

The Toad that went out to Tea.



T'S very lucky for me," said a bloated, rough-looking Toad, as he rolled something carefully between his fore-feet, and then swallowed it down like a pill, "that I've cast my old coat on the very day of Miss Pollywog's tea-party. I've felt sleepy and drowsy these two days. The poor old creatures would have been quite disappointed, as they naturally look to a Toad of my experience and property for a little advice and instruction."

The Toad pompously cleared his throat here, and twinkled his bright eyes round in search of something juicy; for swallowing one's own skin is dry

work, let me tell you. He darted out his tongue at a worm crawling near, but without success.

"Never mind," said he, "it will soon be tea-time; I shall take an hour's nap, and then set out."

He felt refreshed when he woke, and his new skin looked very much better than the old one. It didn't seem to make him any more active, though; he hobbled and waddled along sadly.

"People should not live the other side of a stubble-field," sighed he; "I declare my legs are quite sore with this prickly stuff, and my new skin's so tender." However, he was not a really cross Toad, so he soon left off grumbling, and waddled as close as he could to the hedge-bank. Some bright-eyed lizards were stretching themselves in the sunshine, coiling their tails in graceful fashion over their backs, the under part of the skin looking red in the sunlight.

"My dear friends," said the Toad, stopping short in his walk, and puffing a good deal, "why don't you take a little gentle exercise this fine afternoon?—far better for your health, you know, than lounging on a bank. Fie! I'm shocked at such laziness. When I was a youngster, I used to take long constitutional walks several times a day, to promote circulation."

"Waddles, not walks," said one of the lizards, looking over his shoulder at the intruder, as he clambered over his two brothers.

The Toad did not answer directly; he *thought* a good deal of the lizard's rudeness, and swelled with indignation.

"People who live in glass-houses shouldn't throw stones," he muttered, as he proceeded on his journey. "I'm sure they move queerly enough, although they do run fast sometimes. Who *would* have a tail that could help it?"

Miss Pollywog resided in a pretty lane on the opposite side of the stubble-field. A deep ditch, full of cresses and forget-me-nots, and pleasantly shadowed by trees, separated the field from the lane. Three of the visitors had already arrived, and

were amusing themselves in swimming up and down, croaking with delight, and showing their yellow legs to the best possible advantage, while they awaited the arrival of the Toad.

A good many remarks were made upon his non-appearance.

"I wonder why Miss Pollywog asked him?" said a frolicsome youngster, who had excited the admiration of the others by his rapid evolutions. "Dear me! he's frightful to look at, and moves like a slug."

"Talking of slugs," said his sister, a greedy-looking young lady Frog, "there's such a heap, spread in a great dock-leaf, Ma, and a great pile of worms besides."

"I know that," said the youngster; "and that's why Miss Pollywog keeps so still. What a lark! she daren't leave the worms, or they'd slip away in a twinkling."

"Oh, bother the worms!" said his sister. "I'd rather go without them than lose such a comfortable bath as we are having. But what's Miss Pollywog about?"

Miss Pollywog seemed quite puckered all over; she saw her respected friend, Mr. Toad, advancing, and yet she dared not move a step to greet him, for fear the worms should escape. However, the Toad did not appear affronted, but hobbled up to her as briskly as he could. While a good many compliments were passing between the hostess and her guest, the three Frogs scrambled out of the water, and hopped up to them. Miss Pollywog introduced them as Mrs. Speckles, her son and daughter.

Miss Speckles giggled, as the Toad made three separate bows, and then she greedily eyed the slugs.

The Toad looked at her and her brother, and finished his survey with a slight sigh.

"It is some time since we met, madam," he said to their mamma, who was squeezing close to Miss Pollywog, evidently with an eye to the worms, for the young folks were already making havoc among the slugs; "I was not aware you had a grown-up family."

"Nor have I, sir," said Mrs. Speckles, sharply. "My boy and girl are certainly very large for their age, but they are quite children, poor dears. Taddy, my darling, make a little room, will you."

"You'll make yourself ill, my boy, if you eat so fast," said the Toad to Taddy, who had just begun upon the worms.

"Bless your rough coat, sir," said Taddy, "I haven't half done yet! You should see what a tea I eat at home; you would stare, you would. I nearly burst myself sometimes."

"Goodness me!" sighed the Toad, "how very sad! You should always leave off hungry, my boy. Remember this for the future."

"Yes, remember," said Miss Pollywog. "Mr. Toad's advice is always worth remembering."

If she had been left alone, Mrs. Speckles would, most likely, have boxed Taddy's ears, and called him a glutton; but no mother likes her office to be usurped, so she observed, "She was thankful to say, her children had always had good appetites, and had never been stinted."

"But don't you think that a pity?" said the Toad.

"Indeed, I should think so!" said Miss Pollywog. She took great pleasure in snapping at Mrs. Speckles when under male protection.

"Ah, but then, my dear Miss Pollywog, you are not a mother," said Mrs. Speckles.

Miss Pollywog trembled with anger at this retort.

"Bless me! no indeed!" she replied, "I'm not, and I'm thankful for it. Mothers seem to have such strange feelings. Feelings blind people sometimes—don't you think so, Mr. Toad?"

"Very much so, my dear madam," said the Toad, helping himself to a fine juicy worm—he was so thick-skinned himself, that he imagined all the world was as fortunate—"and that is one reason, madam, why strong feeling of any kind is to be deprecated—it always leads people astray out of the regular beaten path of life."

"But you do not object to the tender feelings, do you," said Miss Pollywog, with a sidelong glance.

"Well, no," he replied—but the soft glance was quite thrown away upon him—"I'm very tender myself, just now; that stubble-field's uncommonly prickly."

Miss Speckles giggled again. She had not long emerged from tadpoleism, and was of a romantic nature; and, like all youthful beauties, she imagined her single seniors, at least those of her own sex, lost all their sentiment when time robbed them of their charms—or ought to, at any rate.

She had commenced a flirtation with a young Mr. Pollywog, and she thought it exceedingly unkind and spiteful on the part of the spinster, that she had not invited her nephew to tea.

Master Taddy seemed to find the party dull. When he had eaten as much as he could manage, he yawned, and gaped, and stretched his legs and arms, which were much too long for his slender body.

His mother nudged him; but his sister, who evidently considered that when young people honour elderly folks with their much-sought presence, they may behave as they like, smiled approvingly.

The truth was, she cared for nothing but admiration, and without it she felt, as she expressed it, "horribly bored."

"I say," said young Mr. Speckles, breaking in upon a dialogue between Miss Pollywog and the Toad, on the subject of digestion, "what a jolly-looking chap that great Water-newt is!"

Young Speckles had just completed his education at a first-rate public school in a neighbouring marsh, where education was carried on "on a very broad basis."

"I say, Ally" (Miss Speckles rejoiced in the name of Ally Croaker), "what a pity you can't have that fine fringe on your coat—wouldn't you like it, just!"

"No," said the Toad, "your sister is, I'm sure, quite content, and far too sensible to care about beauty. Beauty, after all, is

only skin-deep, and young people are the last who should care for adornment—simplicity suits them best. It is when charms are on the wane, that a little art is required to elevate them.”

“Yes, exactly so,” said Miss Pollywog. “You think so, I’m sure, dear Mrs. Speckles?”

“Well, I don’t know; I believe I side with the young people. All that is gay and bright seems their natural property—at any rate, they’ll think so, whatever you may tell them to the contrary,” she added, laughing. “But, Taddy, I would have you beware of the ditch when that great Newt comes this way; you and Ally would just be a supper for the voracious monster.

“Yes, mother,” and “We’ll take care, dear,” they replied, as they hopped off together. “What a jolly old muff Mr. Toad is!” young Speckles whispered to his sister.

“Had I not better follow them?” said the Toad, in a sort of heavy puffet. “They seem much too heedless to be trusted alone.”

“Yes; I wonder you trust them alone,” said Miss Pollywog.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Speckles, with dignity, “I can quite trust them, and I had rather they were left to themselves.”

Mr. Toad and Miss Pollywog shook their heads, and looked shocked.

“But, my dear madam,” said the Toad, with as much excitement as was possible to his cold temperament, “do you allow young people to think and act for themselves?”

“Surely not!” chimed in Miss Pollywog.

Mrs. Speckles was of an irritable nature, although she generally managed to keep it under control; but her children were too precious in her eyes to be made the subject of common talk, especially with casual acquaintances; so she answered, warmly—

“I must tell you, Mr. Toad, as I told Miss Pollywog just now, that people cannot understand these things till they have children of their own. Outsiders are sure to see all the faults, and, of course, make no allowance.”

"Pray don't excite yourself, dear Mrs. Speckles," said Miss Pollywog.

"No, indeed!" said the Toad. "Excitement is so injurious to digestion, that it is a wonder to me how any sensible person can give way to it. Be calm, my dear madam—always be calm!"—he cleared his throat with emphasis—"I only wanted to show you that bystanders see things more clearly than those whose feelings are interested; their judgment is not biassed."

"I know that, as well as you can tell me," said Mrs. Speckles, very shortly; "but I should hope each child's mother must know best how to manage it. I believe I must soon wish you good evening, for I promised Mr. Speckles to be home in time to give him his supper."

"Really, now! does your husband eat supper?" said the Toad. "I am surprised! Does he know that it is very injurious to digestion—will shorten his life, in fact? You should remonstrate, my dear madam; you should not permit such an unwholesome practice; it will——"

But Mrs. Sparkles could not bear any more—

"My husband does what he likes, Mr. Toad, as I hope you will when you enter the married state; but it seems to me you're far too busy looking after your neighbours' affairs to attend to your own. Good evening, Miss Pollywog; good evening Mr. Toad!" and Mrs. Speckles hopped after her offspring, feeling very sore and provoked with herself for having been provoked by such antagonists.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Toad, puffing out his cheeks with amazement.

"The old story," she said to herself, "'maids' children.' I could find it in my heart to wish them each a ready-made family of six. They'd be obliged to mind their own business then, poor things. Well, they've got nothing to think about, that's clear. But I won't drink tea again with them in a hurry; it has made me quite warm, I declare."

She soon found her children, and, much to Taddy's chagrin carried them off with her, for the Water-newt was glaring at them with hungry, disappointed eyes, after having vainly tried to coax them into the ditch.

The Toad, soon after, took his leave. He said he had spent a very pleasant evening, and of course he had. He had fulfilled the two objects of his visit—eaten a hearty tea, and *interfered* and found fault to his heart's content. What greater enjoyment possible? It is pleasant to feel yourself wiser than anyone else, but infinitely pleasanter to show people that you are so!

It was now nearly dusk. He waddled slowly along, ruminating on the folly of indulgence in parents, and, most especially, how much obliged all the world ought to be to him, Mr. Toad, for the great care he took of them, in giving them such good advice.

"What ignorance there is among people, to be sure," he thought, "and what self-conceit!" He was passing near a piece of marshy ground, as he thought this, and from out of it arose the evening chorus of the frogs—"Kur-r-r-k—Kur-r-r-k—Kur-r-r-k!" He stopped to listen—"There's a case in point; did any one ever hear such a din? and I'm sure they think it beautiful! Then they're as proud as peacocks of the way they can hop! Ah, I'm glad I'm not a frog!" and he again resumed his slow progress, with his head very much in the air, on the look-out for more errors in creation; when suddenly he rubbed against something very prickly.

"Halloa!" he exclaimed, "what, another stubble-field, when I came all round by the road to avoid it? Ah, gracious patience me! it's alive, I declare! Well I never!" And the Toad almost jumped with terror when the prickly ball unrolled and sidled up to him.

"Don't you know an old friend when you see him?" said the Hedgehog.

"Friend, indeed!" said the Toad. "It's not the act of a friend

to make a pincushion of my side. Oh dear! you've taken all my breath away!"

The Hedgehog laughed. "It will soon come back," said he; "you're seldom long silent."

"Well," gasped the Toad, "if it were my last word, I must protest against your wearing these nasty bristles—they endanger life, and property too. I believe you have quite spoilt my new skin. You should give some warning of your presence, and not lie there, rolled up in a ball, like a log or a stone, so that no one notices you."

"If you'd been minding your own business, you would have seen me," said the Hedgehog. "Now, I always mind mine, and just now I'm on the look-out for a supper. If you were a frog, I'd gobble you up directly. At any rate, if my skin's bristly, it's not poisonous."

"Well, never mind that," said the Toad—he was so glad to save it, that he forgave the insult to his skin—"but now, just tell me if you ever saw anything so foolish as the conduct of that bat? There he goes, skimming about, darting into people's eyes without the least noise or warning—in fact, making himself a perfect nuisance. The folly of the world is really beyond——"

But here a fearful pain shot through his side, and with a cry of agony, he fell senseless. A ploughman, returning from his work, had set his hob-nailed shoe on him in the dusk.

"What is the good of having bright eyes, unless you use them?" said the hard-hearted Hedgehog. "Now, I always mind my own business;" and he left his unlucky friend to his fate.

The poor Toad recovered his senses, but not the use of the wounded side, which dragged along wearily for the rest of his life, keeping him always in mind of the eventful evening he went out to tea.

The Inquisitive Chimney-pot.

A FABLE.

“**W**HEREVER does the smoke go to, I wonder?” exclaimed a young Chimney-pot one gusty September morning; “it puffs out, and out, as if it would smother us entirely, and then sweeps round that corner, and is out of sight in an instant. Grandfather, you are much better able to see than I am; can’t you tell me anything about it?”

And the speaker, a young Chimney-pot, who stood about third in a very respectable but many-coloured and multiform stack, puffed a whole volume of smoke in the face of the tall cowed relation she addressed.

“I certainly stand at the edge, and so I suppose you imagine, you foolish, giddy-pated creature, that I stare up and down the street all day, poking my nose into other people’s business. If I were to be staring here and there, as you would have me, I should be very likely to get into trouble.”

“Trouble, indeed! I never heard of such a thing happening to a Chimney-pot. I am quite glad of the idea, for, to confess the truth, I find this upper life a dull one: nothing but sky to look at all day long. I often wish myself back in the cheerful little yard I was brought up in. But what kind of trouble could happen to you, Gaffer?”

The elder, thus addressed, did not seem quite pleased with his neighbour’s familiarity, for he shook his cowl about a good deal before he answered her—

“Young people, especially those who dress in a new-fangled

manner, are apt to be inquisitive and impertinent; if you had a little more reflection, you would know, without giving me the trouble of saying it, that if I were always twisting my head about, as you would have me do, I should, perhaps, send the smoke down again instead of letting it escape, and then I should have a troublesome monster brushing away inside me, and positively shaking his brush in triumph through one of my nostrils; he comes often enough, without any encouragement on my part."

"It really is a shameful use to put us to," sighed the young one, glancing down at her elaborate petticoat, the ornamental flutings of which were becoming sadly smoke-stained; "but I would not care for anything, if I could only find out where the smoke goes to." And she looked drearily round in search of sympathy.

Good advice is rarely taken, even when we sweeten the edges of the cup; but if the draught is proffered in its natural bitterness, it is sure to nauseate.

Our pretty Terra-Cotta Chimney-pot, surrounded by respectable and discreet white, grey, and zinc neighbours, of all shapes and sizes, but perfectly unornamented, felt herself decidedly ill-used and unappreciated, and was, consequently, always on the look-out for amusement.

"If I dared but ask that majestic young King!" said she, looking up at a tall zinc *vis-à-vis*, with his top cut in the shape of a crown. "He towers above us all, and can easily see round the corner; but Grandfather keeps such a sharp look-out that I am afraid. I will try, though, when he is asleep, as he will be, after dinner, I expect; for I see that his services are not required very late. The King, I know, is very wakeful, and so can I be, if I try. I feel sure he admires me extremely, though he dare not look this way, because Grandfather is so prejudiced, and calls him 'a new-fangled nincompoop;' but what can anything so old-fashioned and out of the world as Grandfather know, I wonder?"

As evening advanced, the smoke curled more and more lazily from the cowed Chimney-pot, and finally the tiny wreaths disappeared altogether.

Our young friend's heart—for Chimney-pots *have* hearts, although this is one of the "things not generally known," that has not been familiarly explained to the public—throbbed violently, and smoke issued from her in quick spasmodic puffs.

She presently contrived to waft a long sentimental wreath towards her very brilliant neighbour, whose polished surface plainly betokened his recent erection.

"You seem melancholy this evening, my charming cousin," said he, conceitedly—for he was very vain of his appearance, and silly enough to be enraptured with the attentions of so well-dressed a Chimney-pot as our young friend Terra-Cotta—"will you tell me why?"

"I fear it would be quite useless," said she, "for you could not help to remove it."

"Do not be too sure of that," said the King; "people of my height and figure have great advantages, and see far more of life than others; I will soon console you, little one."

Terra-Cotta did not half like so familiar an address, but as he immediately added—

"You are such a pretty little creature, it would be quite a pleasure to do so,"—

She was appeased, and confided to him her vehement desire to know what became of the smoke—

"For," said she, "I *must* know; my curiosity leaves me no peace, day or night, and if I do not soon find out, I shall crack from sheer vexation."

"Dear—dear—dear," laughed King Zinc, "how very amusing! why, you can satisfy yourself as easily as possible. I, of course, know, because a Chimney-pot in my position of society knows everything, public and private; but you had much better find it out for yourself, and therefore I shall not tell you. The very

next time there's a high wind, instead of clinging close to the roof, let the blast sway you as it likes; and when it bends you forward, look well over the parapet, and you'll see where the smoke goes to."

Terra-Cotta tenderly puffed out her thanks; she passed a sleepless night, eagerly watching the gathering clouds, which she surely foresaw must soon be followed by the wind that was driving them onward; gradually it rose in sweeping eddies, each increasing in violence. At length came a prolonged gust—a sort of tornado.

Terra-Cotta followed the advice of the treacherous King, abandoned herself to the guidance of the blast, and leant wildly forward in the direction of the drifting smoke. * * *

There was a sharp, despairing cry!

The cloud of smoke was whirled rapidly away by the wind, and there lay on the pavement the pretty, too inquisitive Chimney-pot—shattered to a thousand fragments.

The Grassy Sea.

CHAPTER I.

IN one of those vast oceans miles away is a wonderful submarine island—or rather continent—for it extends some hundreds of miles. It is not altogether submerged beneath the waves; the thick vegetation of which it seems entirely composed rises continually above the surface of the water, hence called by mariners “The Grassy Sea.”

In a sequestered nook of this aquatic territory, shaded from the meridian heat of the tropical sun by a clustering screen of the sea-vine, a young and lovely being lay reclining at the feet of her mate. She looked youthful, almost childish, yet the expression of her face was not quite that of childish innocence. There was an occasional furtive glance in the liquid blue eyes, and a discontented pout about the rosy under-lip, that told a want of truth and singleness of heart. Her gaze, just then, was fixed on her husband, who was fondly playing with her golden hair. He had lustrous eyes like Zephitha’s, of a darker hue, but filled with noble fire and soul, which seemed now all centred in the beautiful creature beside him.

“And will you not take me to the Coral Wood, Alardos?” murmured she.

“I cannot, my own darling, as I told you before. Our king commands my attendance. I am indeed very sorry, dear one—do not give me the pain of refusing you again.”

Zephitha pouted, and raised her head as if repelling her husband’s caresses.

"A month ago, when first we were wed, you would have dived to the crystal-green rock for my sake; and now——"

"And now my darling is self-willed, for I know she loves me really too well to wish me to sacrifice honour to her caprice."

Zephita pouted a little while longer, spite of the tender, melancholy looks of her husband; then suddenly turning, she threw her arms round his neck.

"I was wilful," said she. "Never mind; I will be very good for a whole week, to make amends."

Alardos strained her to his heart, with a fondness that showed how anxious he was for reconciliation, and, soon after, left her. As soon as he was out of sight, Zephita gathered up her long tresses, which she fastened with a spray of bright-green seaweed, and walked impatiently up and down the harbour. She then amused herself, for some time, plucking grapes. Weary of this, and finding a brilliant anemone growing near, she began tormenting the unhappy little creature, until it drew in all its slender arms, and remained so firmly closed that there was no further amusement to be extracted from it. With a sigh of impatience, she threw herself on her couch, and remained quiet for a few minutes; then starting up, she cried—

"I am *resolved* to see the Coral Grove! Alardos will not return for some time; and I am sure I can easily find my way. He will not be angry if I tell him of it afterwards, and if he is, I can soon kiss love back again into his eyes."

For some distance her path lay along a tolerably smooth road, shaded by vines laden with sea-grapes, while, at their base, covering the bank from which they sprung, were bright masses of pink and rose-coloured weed, which, in this submarine region, displayed their minute foliage fully expanded.

These bushes soon grew thicker and larger. The smooth path became encumbered with sharp-edged murexes and strombuses, that pained Zephita's delicate feet so much that she nearly gave up her journey, and more than once she trod on the porcupine-

like spikes of the sea-urchin, which drew the blood. Just then, however, she caught, through the rose-coloured bushes, a vision of something bright and glittering; and, curiosity overcoming the pain of her wounded feet, she again hastened onward. When she reached the object that had attracted her, she started back with an exclamation of delight.

On a pyramidal rock of chrysolite lay, piled in irregular heaps, masses of the beautiful Venus's-ear shell, whose polished centres, reflecting the rays of the setting sun, had caught her gaze.

She sat down to rest here, while hundreds of tropical birds, seeking their fishy prey, darted in and out of the water around her. Fishes of all kinds leaped about, equally intent on chasing their smaller brethren; while, in the distance, soft sounds of music added to the wonderful beauty of the scene. The shadows grew longer, and reminded Zephitha that she must not delay.

More and more rugged grew the road. The rose-coloured trees had given place to pendent green filmy masses, similar in texture to that which formed the apparent soil of all this region. At first the water had often not reached higher than her waist, but for some time past it closed high over her head; she was evidently nearing the roots of ocean. The light grew dimmer and dimmer; the path became slimy and slippery; strange and unknown sea-plants grew and floated around her; reptiles of every shape and form started from beneath her feet; the toad-fish and sea-devil startled her with their frightful forms; and the great sea-worm looked evilly at her with his fiery eyes, as he glided away among the rose-lipped shells that formed high banks on either side.

Tired, and frightened at the increasing darkness, Zephitha at length reached the end of her journey. Suddenly she found herself surrounded on all sides by immense trees, whose stems, branches, and leaves were formed of red coral, except here and there, where a few white boughs shone all the more brightly in contrast. The summits of the trees were hid from her gaze—they seemed towering to the sky; while below, the massive roots,

spreading on every side, cushioned here and there by sea-moss, formed pleasant resting-places.

The charming colour and form of the coral branches entranced Zephita: she tried to break off a branch from some of the long, pendent boughs that reached the ground; but this was no easy matter, so she contented herself with collecting the twigs that lay scattered about.

As soon as her eyes became accustomed to the obscurity, she saw that it was principally caused by the closely-intersecting branches above, and that if she could, in any way, ascend, she should once more enjoy the sunshine. She was an excellent climber, and, having recovered her fatigue, she thought that by scaling one of the coral trees her object would be effected. She paused when about half-way up, and, as she did so, her hand rested on something cold and glutinous. She looked closer, and perceived, to her astonishment, innumerable small gelatinous creatures, swarming in and out of every interstice in the coral.

Hastily she recommenced climbing, which grew more and more difficult as she approached the surface of the water; for the branches here were so closely intertwined, that the ascent became more like that of a rock than of a tree. However, to her great joy, the coral-worms had disappeared, and the scarlet hue of the coral was infinitely more vivid.

The sun was still shining brightly when she emerged from the water. She was now above the level of the ocean, so that she had a clear view of the distant horizon. As she turned, she perceived what, at first sight, seemed an immense rock near her; but, on examining it more attentively, she saw it was one of the wonderful creatures Alardos had told her of, and which, he said, occasionally moved across that region, full of living beings similar to themselves.

"O that I could see some of them!" thought Zephita. "I wonder if they can speak?"

As she continued gazing at the noble vessel, which appeared to be stationary, except for the gentle undulation caused by the waves (where she stood the water was smooth as glass), a small dark object was lowered from its side, and presently she saw it moving towards her. Zephita watched its progress with breathless interest. It came nearer, and presently paused within a few feet of her; and she then perceived, with delight not unmingled with fear, a living being seated within it, who guided its motions. Zephita was fascinated, and unable to move.

"Is she a reality, or an illusion?" murmured the creature, as he gazed at Zephita with such intense and fervent admiration, that she felt her eyes droop, and a warm blush rise on her cheek. But she soon looked up again, for anything so beautiful she had never beheld. His eyes were blue as the summer sky, and his hair waved in golden locks over his shoulders. She was roused from her gaze by his voice:—

"Are you a mermaid, fair creature, sent to turn our brains and lure our vessel to destruction? or are you a human being, like myself?"

"I know not," said Zephita, "what a mermaid may be; but I would not harm you, even if I had the power."

"I believe you," said the beautiful stranger; "be you mermaid, nymph, or kelpie, you look more made for love than for hate;" and he moved his boat nearer as he spoke.

Zephita's heart beat with a new, delicious sensation, at the music of his voice—a feeling of burning, almost delirious, happiness thrilled through every fibre. She had never experienced anything of this kind in listening to Alardos; and, as his image flitted across her thoughts, a dim consciousness of wrong, for a moment tempted her at once to descend the coral bank, and commence her homeward journey; but even while the warning thought trembled into life, the soft, sweet voice of the stranger silenced its counsels.

"You are fairer," he continued, "than any daughter of Earth,

and your eyes speak loving tenderness: if I could find some favour in them," added he, entreatingly.

Zephita did not speak, but her large lustrous eyes showed no sign of displeasure at the warmth of his words and looks.

"Do you dwell alone here? When, from the ship, I descried a moving object on the Coral Bank, I did not deem so fair a creature inhabited it."

Zephita's eyes beamed still more brightly, as she listened to his flattering words and glances.

"This is a deserted place," said she, "only inhabited by coral-worms; my home is at some distance."

"Then it is only by chance that I have encountered you. Oh, say," he continued, passionately, "that this shall not be our last meeting! I shall see you again? Let me find you here to-morrow!"

Poor vain little Zephita! her heart throbbed and bounded with a delicious tumult of fear and delight, so that, for some moments, she could not speak. Now she longed to be beside the stranger, and the next instant to fly from him.

The young sailor perceived her agitation. "Why should you fear me? I will not harm you, lovely being. Come, sit beside me." He tried gently to draw her into the boat; but Zephita shook her head. "Well, then, sweetest, I must come to you," he cried, apparently so intoxicated with her wondrous beauty as to forget all restraint or prudence; and rising, he tried to throw his arms round her, but Zephita started back.

"No, no, do not come!" she cried in terror. "You would perish miserably: such is the law of this region. I will be here again to-morrow—I dare stay no longer now."

She waved both arms towards him with exquisite grace, then disappeared beneath the water.

CHAPTER II.

As Zephita descended the coral-trees, and commenced her homeward journey, her heart seemed filled with wonderful, inexplicable feelings, more delightful than any she had hitherto experienced. The increasing darkness at length roused her from her reverie, and she became fearful of losing the track. Presently she saw at some distance a faint glimmering light; it gradually became more distinct, and she perceived Alardos, bearing on a staff one of those minute creatures—the phosphorescent marvels of the ocean.

“My darling, I am so rejoiced to have found you!” he cried, throwing his arm round her.

Zephita turned from him with a mixture of aversion and shame. She could have endured his reproaches just then far better than his tenderness. Alardos, attributing her downcast looks to sorrow for her disobedience, forebore to question her; he only said, playfully—

“I ought to have known that feminine curiosity must be gratified at any risk. Only, dearest, if you had waited one hour, we could have gone together. You might have been frightened, you little adventurous darling, in that wild solitude. You are very tired, are you not?” and as he spoke he put his arm round her.

Why did Zephita turn her head shudderingly from her husband as he fondly stooped to embrace her? Alardos looked surprised and pained; but, thinking fatigue was probably the cause of her strange manner, he walked silently beside her till they reached the harbour glittering with pale green light. Placing Zephita on the softest couch he could find, he seated himself beside her, pitying and caressing her at intervals. At last she spoke:—

“Alardos, I am sure you are sleepy and tired; had you not

better retire to rest? I shall stay here and watch the stars; they are wondrously bright to-night, methinks."

"You too must need repose, dearest, after so long and fatiguing a walk," said her husband; "but we will look at them together."

Zephita turned from him so impatiently, that Alardos could no longer attribute her strange silence to fatigue.

"Zephita!" he said, gravely and sadly, "you are grieving me very much by your unloving, cold looks; if I have in anything offended you, tell me at once what it is, and let us be friends. Husbands and wives should not make each other unhappy."

"I am not angry with you," said Zephita. "Dear me, how easily offended you are! Ah! I see you have not really forgiven me my journey to the Coral Grove, although you made such a magnanimous pretence of it at first," she added, with a scornful laugh.

Alardos looked at her in blank astonishment. He had often longed for an adequate return of love from his wife, but he had ascribed the coldness with which she often received his most ardent caresses to timidity and the short time of their wedded life; wayward he had also seen her; but the cool, deliberate scorn with which she now spoke, filled him with grief and alarm.

"You have seen an evil water-sprite, Zephita," (she trembled), "and he has turned your heart from your husband."

Zephita burst into tears. "You are very unkind, Alardos, to say such wicked things of me."

But as she spoke she reflected, that by persisting in offending him she might possibly arouse his suspicions that something really had occurred to her in her visit; so she continued to weep bitterly.

Alardos, though inwardly more incensed than he had allowed her to perceive, was not proof against her sorrow. He paced the harbour a few minutes longer, then approached, and took both her hands in his.

"Zephitha!" he said, earnestly, "*how* I love you, you can never know; nor do I believe it possible you can dream the agony one cold word or look of yours gives to my heart. You see I do not hesitate to show you the extent of your power over me. Be merciful, then. Do not wound again by unkindness a love that, I repeat, is as yet beyond your comprehension."

He looked tenderly at her, but did not offer to caress her. Zephitha, for the moment, was touched in spite of herself. She must indeed have been made of stone, if she had resisted those deep loving eyes. She bent her head penitently on the hands that still held hers. Alardos clasped her passionately to him, and was once more happy.

But next morning Zephitha seemed restless, absent, and almost unconscious of her husband's presence, save once, when she let her soft hair fall in rich waving undulations to her feet. Alardos was musing rather sadly upon her changed mood, his eyes bent on the ground. She looked at him contemptuously.

"How foolish one is sometimes!" she said. "I thought, when I listened to your love-tales, Alardos, that at least you would always care for the charms you once said I possessed, and you do not waste a word of admiration on me now. I may adorn myself with every grace my fancy can devise, but you never remark a change." And as she spoke, she rolled her tresses rapidly and angrily together, and fastened them with the little coral sprays she had gathered the preceding evening.

Alardos smiled. "I suppose I shall best make my peace by saying, you are always so charming that I can discover no possible improvement."

But she turned away with sudden coldness.

"Zephitha!" he said, more seriously, "I thought we had ended this; only one new charm do I desire in your eyes—that they may truly reflect my love for you."

She made no answer, and he continued:—

"I think you are a little tired of me, dearest! To-day I am

sent on a long journey, and may possibly not return till nightfall : come, let us part lovingly."

Zephitha felt so relieved at the idea of being left free to visit the Coral Grove, that she with difficulty concealed the satisfaction that lighted up her eyes ; guilty joy filled her heart, and she was able with a deceiving smile to bid her husband farewell, if not warmly, at least more cheerfully than he had expected.

When he was gone she was unhappy. His forbearing, deep love seemed to rise in judgment, and she trembled as she felt how much more warmly she regarded this stranger than her husband. She would not go : but then the irresistible blue eyes and sunny face rose before her, and she again longed passionately for the hour of meeting.

CHAPTER III.

THE evening sky looked dark and threatening as Zephitha left the arbour. How the absence of warm sunlight changed the face of the valley ! it was gloomy and dismal enough to have frightened away a stouter heart than hers. The foliage of the bright rose-coloured bushes hung in dingy, matted curtains ; the path was so slippery, that she scarcely saved herself from falling more than once. Often she felt tempted to turn back, but self-will and the thought of the stranger urged her on.

She gladly hailed the huge stems of the coral-trees, although she was so exhausted that she paused for breath before she ascended the loftiest of them. She found the stranger anxiously awaiting her, and again she greedily listened to his winning flatteries and words of love. He questioned her of her strange life and place of abode, and laughed scornfully when she told him the tradition that this wonderful submerged region was as yet untrodden by the foot of man, and that no purely human being could safely dwell on it, even on those parts uncovered by the waves.

"Such idle forebodings have chased the smiles from your pretty lips, redder than the coral around us, fair creature," said he, playfully stroking her silken ringlets, for he had at last succeeded in persuading Zephita to seat herself beside him in the boat, and she feared him no longer now. "I am an excellent diver, and I fear nothing, and am resolved to see the wonders of this Coral Grove, for to us it appears a mere shoal or bank of branches: if you can exist beneath the surface of the water, I can, too. You do not wish me to leave you, my Coral nymph?" said he, as he clasped her yet more closely to him, and pressed kisses on her pouting lips. "Ah, you are indeed no water-fairy, your blood flows as warmly as mine."

"Leave me?" said Zephita. "Oh, no, no! I could not live without you now. I feel I did not know what life was till I saw you!" and she threw her beautiful arms around him.

The stranger, although he caressed and soothed her, and would willingly, had he dared, have carried off his beautiful prize to the ship, smiled inwardly at the thought that, on the morrow, he should perhaps be leagues distant; but what harm could there possibly be in deceiving a sea-nymph, and making the best of what chance had thrown in his way?

Zephita grew more and more infatuated, and at last yielding to his caresses and importunities, she consented to guide him to the Coral Grove, and thence to the chrysolite rock, whose wonders she had described to him.

Strange that all this time no thought of her wronged and trusting husband flashed through her vain selfish heart.

They soon gained the foot of the coral tree. Zephita, who had descended first, started back with a cry of terror when she perceived her husband approaching. She turned to her companion.

He had just reached the ground; but as his foot touched the soil, it yielded to the unusual pressure—down, down he sank, rapidly as an arrow cleaves the air. The treacherous filmy mass,

which no mortal foot might safely tread, closed over him for ever, leaving no trace behind.

Zephita stood paralysed with grief and terror, unconscious for some moments that Alardos was standing close beside her.

He, too, looked horror-struck, but it did not seem to be at the event just recorded: his eyes were fixed on his wife.

All their soft expression had vanished—a stern majesty reigned in his whole demeanour; and when at length the wretched Zephita raised her eyes, she shrank back trembling as from some avenging spirit.

Long he gazed upon her as she sank lower and lower, and finally crouched on the ground in a paroxysm of grief and shame.

Still Alardos spoke not; he seemed to try to utter sounds, but to fail in the attempt.

At length he looked down at Zephita, and pity softened the freezing horror that had petrified his senses.

“Unhappy one! have I indeed then caused you such grief, that you are forced to seek consolation from a stranger?—and oh! what woe your love has wrought him!”

But Zephita started up—fury gleaming in her wild eyes and distorted countenance.

“A stranger!” and she laughed frantically; “to me no stranger. He is my dearest love—my beautiful—my own mate, and I am his bride, and he is waiting for me!”

Then, as her eye rested for an instant on the sudden grave of her lover, she uttered a wild piercing cry, and struck Alardos fiercely on the breast.

“You have murdered him—you dug this pit to ensure his destruction! Mean, effeminate, and foolish I ever thought you—now I see you are treacherous and cruel. Dare not to blame me—my heart was free, it never felt one real throb of love for you. My only hope is, that you yet care enough for me to suffer by losing me.”

She turned, and fled away like the wind.

Alardos for an instant stood spell-bound by her last words; then he hastened after her, wildly calling on her to stop and hear him.

For some moments, which to him seemed hours, he saw no trace of her. At last, at the extremity of the valley, he caught a glimpse of her white robe.

He looked around; they were amid fearful precipices, the path was broken and perilous. Still he dared not slacken his pace, for he trembled lest again he should lose sight of Zephita.

To his relief, the white robe appeared stationary. At length he approached near enough to see her standing on the almost conical summit of a small rock, surrounded on every side but that on which he advanced by precipices of frightful depth.

She seemed to be only awaiting her husband's near approach, for the instant she perceived him, she waved her arms exultingly, and with a wild cry plunged into the fathomless abyss.



It was a lovely May morning; the birds chirped blithely to each other; the very leaves of the tall wych-elm trees that cast a chequered shadow over the little cottage seemed to rub gently together, as if unable to express the joy that filled their veins.

All nature was astir, and yet with a soft, tranquillising movement—nothing to jar, to ruffle, or disturb! How different to the wakening hum of a great city, or even a small household!

The inhabitants of the cottage, however, seemed children of nature in this respect. A little girl came quietly out to the faggot-stack, and selected a few sticks. Soon a thin streak of curling smoke rose from the chimney and twined about the leaves, and lost itself among them before it reached the summit of the trees.

Breakfast did not take long to accomplish, for the little girl presently re-appeared with a pitcher, to fetch water from a neighbouring pump, leading a white-headed boy by the hand. He was evidently quite unwilling, and hung back, with the fingers of his disengaged hand crammed into his mouth.

“Be a good boy, Tommy,” said the girl, coaxingly, “and I’ll show ye the rare, large leaves I found yesterday.”

She opened the garden-gate for him to pass into a shady lane, sloping down from the cottage; but a glimpse of yellow flowers among the dark-green celandine leaves on the hedge-bank caught his eye; he bounded from her, and was soon down on his knees in the shallow ditch, gathering a handful of golden blossoms.

“That comes of low parentage,” said the Dock-leaves on the other side of the hedge—they could see and hear all that passed through a gap, the very gap through which the little girl had discovered them the day before—“to think of preferring anything so low-minded as that little yellow foolishness! If it would even hold up its head it might be better.”

The Burdock shivered from the tips of its leaves to its roots, and then stood stiffer than ever; for it prided itself on its antiquity. This was the second year that it had raised its head in the self-same place; whereas, its neighbours, a wild Chamomile and a straggling little Pimpernel, and several rough-looking Thistles, were all newcomers; last year their places had been occupied by tall Dyers’-weed, which had now disappeared, all but a few straggling shoots, peeping through a wilderness of wild Chamomile.

"Yes, it is very pleasant to feel ancient blood in one's veins!" said the Dock-leaves. "Our isolated position here, too, gives one so much time for thought, and thought enlarges the mind far more than mere vulgar contact with one's fellows. It gives one leisure to dwell on the faults of others, too, and devise benevolent schemes for their improvement. Yes, we really might do something for the poor little Celandine."

The summer passed on: the Burdock was soon covered with its insignificant blossoms, and their round, prickly seed-vessels. The leaves were happier than ever: they had been lecturing and advising for some time past; but, unfortunately, no one seemed to heed them.

Now here was a chance; these round messengers could be sent anywhere, and not easily silenced. Day after day, they had been speaking to the Thistles, on the folly of arming their leaves with sharp spines. It was a pernicious habit, they said, that made them unpleasant to their neighbours and to everyone else; but the Thistles, merry-hearted fellows, who were content to be friendly and sociable with all, provided they were treated as equals, thought the Dock-leaves "narrow-minded old fidgets," and paid no attention to them.

The Pimpernel had escaped notice—it grew so close to the ground, and the Burdock never stooped; but a rather loud peal of laughter now drew attention.

"Well, I declare," said the Dock-leaves, "you seem very merry this morning! At whose expense, I wonder?" Tough as they imagined other people to be, they were very touchy themselves. "And you are positively blossoming still, my small friend? Never was anything so silly. Don't you think, now, in your humble position of life, a little less show and expenditure in your dress would be advisable? You would lay by a far richer harvest of seeds, if you spent less on outside show."

All the Pimpernel blossoms laughed louder than ever.*

* Pimpernel, or *Anagallis*; named from *anagelao*, to laugh.

"We only want to enjoy life our own way," said the first that recovered herself sufficiently to speak; "and we have been told that our blossoms are not merely ornamental—often we have been called the poor man's weather-glass."

"Too, too, too!" said the Dock-leaves. They shook so with annoyance and vexation, that down rolled a great Bur into the midst of the Pimpernels; but, as they still laughed, he was shaken down further, till he reached the pathway round the field at the foot of the bank.

"That's exactly the way people talk and think who have no common sense or judgment of their own. Everybody knows you are very unwise; but of course you know better than anyone else—it's just the way of the world!" the Dock-leaves sighed.

"But, please," said a very small Chamomile-flower, who had been listening eagerly (it had somehow imbibed an immense respect for the Burdock; perhaps it was natural, for people who lay down the law to others often succeed in impressing an idea of their depth on shallow minds—the bursting of an inflated paper-bag has been, before now, mistaken for the report of a pistol)—"but, please, who is *everybody*?"

This was very trying. Two Burs immediately detached themselves, and clung round the neck of the Chamomile, remonstrating on its folly, and on the bad taste and tact evinced in its question. However, the Dock-leaves always had an answer ready—

"Everybody? Why, of course, everybody is everybody. What a very foolish remark, to be sure!"

The Chamomile was puzzled; but it could not bear to be suspected of dulness, as well as bad taste, so it nodded as if perfectly satisfied.

"But why should we not benefit mankind, as well as our fellows?" said the Dock-leaves; and they looked about for a suitable object.

People, however, seldom went along the field-path, unless it were the owner of the cottage in the lane, and it was, perhaps,

scarcely worth while noticing him; he evidently worked hard for his daily bread, poor wretch! The Dock-leaves had seen gentlemen and ladies occasionally—people worth speaking to—people who did nothing but amuse themselves from morning till night.

“Persons we could speak to,” said they, “and who would, doubtless, benefit by our advice, if they only would pass this way.”

Just at this moment the cottager appeared in sight.

It was a sultry August evening, and he had taken off both hat and working jacket, and was sauntering along, as if anticipating that most delightful of pleasures, a quiet evening with his family after a hard day’s labour.

Spite of his inferiority, the Dock-leaves felt it their duty to remonstrate. As he brushed past, at least a dozen Burs fastened on his legs, all speaking at once.

“How can you be so foolish, at your age, and with a wife and children to provide for, to run such a risk of cold? Don’t say anything—we know all about it, in fact, we have great medical knowledge. You should have more sense and self-control, and bear such a trifle as being too hot patiently.”

“Yes, very wrong, indeed!” echoed another of the Burs, pressing into the calf of his leg.

The cottager walked on, without seeming to heed, except that he shook his legs, and knocked one against the other impatiently, as if the Burs annoyed him. But the sight of his two children at the cottage-gate made him forget such insignificant troubles. He stooped down, and lifted Tommy up to his shoulder, throwing his hat and coat to the little girl, after giving her a hearty kiss.

“There!” said a Bur, “just like the folly and improvidence of this class of people! They know that their children have a rough, hard life before them, and yet they treat them as fondly and tenderly as if they were well provided for and had not to work for their living—such utter want of common sense! To think of the life that is before those children, poor little things!—oh, oh!”

For the little girl was following her father, and, seeing the Bur on his stocking, plucked it off, and threw it into a hawthorn-tree. It was more frightened than hurt, however, for it fell into a spider's web.

"Oh, indeed!" said the Spider, who had made a rush at the Bur. "I have the most right to complain. Why, you've broken all my morning's work to pieces, and are not fit to eat either."

"Never mind, don't fret about it," said the Bur. "When I've settled myself—for these gummy threads of yours rather stifle one—possibly I can advise you in rebuilding your web, if it is absolutely necessary to rebuild it. Don't you think, now——"

"Advise your grandmother!" interrupted the Spider, looking very bloated and angry. Yes, I believe you'll be advising the sun, next, to rise in the west, instead of the east! Why don't you mind your own business? No, you've got none to mind, and that's what makes you such a busy-body. Nothing like work, and hard work too, to keep people straight, and make them mind their own business instead of their neighbours'. And why were you pitying those children just now, I should like to know? I heard you. Poor, indeed! They are far richer than any I ever saw, and I've been a traveller in my time, let me tell you."

The Spider had been darting from one side of the web to the other while she spoke, and the Bur found himself inextricably meshed; so he answered, rather meekly—

"Why, they have a poor home, and poor parents, and a poor, hard-working life before them—can anything be worse?"

"Yes a great deal," said the Spider; "they might have all these hardships—if they are hardships. which I deny; for among my travels I have been in houses, and once I heard read, out of a large book that every one seemed to listen to, that a special blessing rests on the poor—with sickness and sorrow in their home; or they might have every luxury, and an unloving, hard father and a dull, fretful mother. They enjoy to the full what is really the best part of life."

"And what's that?" said the Bur, in a hoarse voice: he was nearly choked, and decidedly uncomfortable altogether, but he was afraid to complain.

"Why, sunshine inside and outside. I don't understand what it comes from, but look in people's faces, and you'll see what I mean. So far as I can make out, those who work the hardest have the largest share of it—or else those who seem to have the fewest enjoyments. That crippled lad, who crawls up here sometimes in the spring to see the celandine in blossom, looks quite as happy as Tommy and his sister. You see, you don't know much about it, my fine fellow. You look miserable enough now, certainly; but you're generally too self-satisfied to care about other people's happiness. I suppose that is *your* particular style of happiness, and you take pretty good care that no one else shall enjoy it, you do, you old, worrying find-fault!" And the Spider, who certainly knew how to talk herself, and who, I am sorry to say, was rather spiteful, gave her web such a tug that the Bur called out for mercy.

"There, get along with you," said the Spider, as she disentangled him; "the ground's the best place for you; you're only spoiling my web."



Three Christmas Days.

“A HAPPY Christmas to you!” said a large, old-fashioned Porcelain Jar, one of the real Chinese breed (none of your smart imitations, albeit of Mr. Minton’s best manufacture), with a delicate cracked ground, on which here and there was a pale-blue ornament, something between a leaf and a dragon, head, legs, and tail greatly preponderating over body.

Her greeting was responded to, in a sepulchral tone, by a tall, carved mahogany Clockcase, that stood in the other corner of a spacious staircase landing, in a gloomy, roomy, old-fashioned house, between the East and West-end of London, not very far from Temple Bar.

The part of the landing they occupied formed a quiet nook, not in full view of the staircase. In it was a deeply-recessed old window-seat, the very place for a nap, or a quiet *tête-à-tête*.

The staircase itself was a study. Had it not been so gloomy, one could have made out the curious devices carved on the massive oak Standards at the top and bottom of each flight of stairs, between which were short, stumpy ballusters. These Standards would have served famously as clubs for Messrs. Gog and Magog, living hard by, had they, by any mischance, lost their own.

“A Merry Christmas to both of you!” cried the Standard nearest the Clockcase, on which seemed to be carved festoons of fruit, laughing masks, and other quaint ornaments: “a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year when it comes!”

The Standard had such a hearty voice—thoroughly oaken and English!—there is much analogy in the words.

“It seems a jolly, crisp, bright Christmas morning,” he continued. “How the bells are going! I wonder they never crack themselves.”

“They do sometimes,” said the Clockcase, gloomily.

“You seem low-spirited, my dear old friend,” observed the Jar. “What can depress your spirits on such a day as this?—nothing to weigh you down either, now.”

“I have seen so many of these days,” said the Clockcase; “so many full of sorrow as well as joy, that I generally spend a part of each anniversary in calling them in review before me, and meditating on the chequered aspect of human life they offer.”

“Oh, I say, old friend, hang prosing and sentiment on Christmas Day! One ought to have nothing but jolly feelings—if it’s for no other reason, ’tis very pleasant to be rubbed so extra clean and bright. Bless your works, my friend!—only I forgot, they’ve all been taken out—the sight of those cheery young faces that come to the party here, as they trip up and down my steps, is delicious—quite warms the fibres of my old heart. I hope they’ll light us up early to-night,” he continued; “I don’t admire being in the dark on Christmas Day.”

“I was going to propose,” said the Jar, in an insinuating voice, “that as I hear the party to-night is larger than usual, and therefore, of course, the guests will stay later, as most likely there will be a dance—how kind and pleasant it would be if our old friend would favour us with some of his reminiscences. Don’t you think it would be very nice, Mr. Standard?”

“Well thought of, ma’am. It would be most uncommonly jolly,” replied he; “always provided none of the young people come out to flirt in that convenient old window close beside our friend.”

“There is no fear of that,” remarked the Jar; “I hear that the dancing is to take place in the dining-room, so I suppose

that the drawing-room will only be tenanted by the 'Wall Flowers,' as they call them; perhaps it may not be visited during the evening."

"Ah!" sighed the Clockcase, "I daresay that window-seat could tell as many tales as I can; but, you see, he has never received any polish, which accounts for his want of small-talk; however, I consent to your plan. When that modern invention in the hall below strikes nine—by which time I suppose the company will all be engaged in their Christmas games—I will relate to you two of the histories which have passed before me."

The "modern invention" struck nine, and the Clockcase commenced his tale.

"'I don't love you at all, Frank. You are very rude, and you tease me.'

"'I don't want you to love me or care for me, you great cry-baby—crying at thirteen years old! You ought to be ashamed, Phoebe.'

"Phoebe did seem ashamed; she hid her face in both hands, and cried heartily; while Frank, with that loud, teasing laugh, which none but a schoolboy is capable of, swung downstairs, leaving little miserable Phoebe crying and sobbing at my feet.

"She got up presently, and dried her eyes. She was not a pretty child—pale, thin-faced, with large eyes of no decided colour, but very remarkable for the earnest warmth of their expression. Her only beauty consisted in the exquisite fairness and delicacy of her skin, and the masses of glossy, dark-brown curls that clustered round her head.

"It was evening, and these two had come quarrelling out of the drawing-room, until their dispute had ended as I have told you.

"'On Christmas Day, too,' said Phoebe to herself; 'he has made it *such* a miserable one to me.'

"She sat and thought a little while longer.

"'Mamma says people never care much for reproaches unless

there is some truth in them. I wonder if anybody else thinks what Frank said; perhaps everybody does, and they are too kind to tell me. What Frank says must be true. Am I so very proud and independent ?

"She walked up and down, musing.

" 'Well, he shall never tell me so again. I am not angry with him now. I wish that some one had told me this before, only not him. I will try and make it up with him.'

"She skipped upstairs, and came down looking brighter and happier than usual; but I do not think she made her peace with Frank. Whenever he passed me, in the course of the evening, he was talking to Louisa, Phœbe's elder sister, and the two seemed to be having many a joke at the expense of poor Phœbe, who finally, her heart swelling at seeing all her efforts at reconciliation frustrated (the poor child made them very awkwardly, I must confess), went sobbing to bed long before the party broke up."

"Poor little girl!" said the Jar, "what a miserable ending to a Christmas-day! But are your stories all of so very juvenile a character?" she asked, with satirical emphasis. "I confess that, in this age of enlightened literature, my mind soars above such juvenile matters."

"Hum! I didn't know," said the Standard, "that you cared about enlightenment and such things. I should have thought that you must have been accustomed to a very benighted condition in your early years."

"I was brought to England at so tender an age, that I remember very little of my early years; but, of course, when I mentioned enlightenment, I was not thinking of extending its advantages. Surely, dear Mr. Standard," she said, glancing complacently at her azure adornments, "we, of the blue blood, cannot be too civilised."

"For my part," said the Clockcase, "I cannot see anything lowering in children's stories."

"Only, my dear friend, you will admit, there is little in them to excite refined sensibility."

That hers was stirred by the argument, was apparent by the fragrant perfume that pervaded the landing, proceeding, no doubt, from the spiced rose-leaves within.

"Well," said the Standard, stoutly, "I vote for another tale—be it young or old."

The Clockcase resumed:—

"Last Christmas Day was a sad one to me. For years I had tenanted an old mansion very similar to this; but sadness and ruin fell upon it. The head of the house, the father (my Phœbe's father) of a large, happy family died, leaving his affairs much embarrassed: all was to be sold off. Instead of the merry party that used to assemble at Christmas, the family dined quietly together, and all were not there. Some of the elder sisters had married. Phœbe was much more subdued than in former years. She had become very handsome. The large colourless eyes had warmed into deep brown, and she was not so pale as in her childish days. But I had noticed that she did not seem happy.

"I had not seen Frank for some time past. I sometimes wondered whether Phœbe still cared for him as she did—none knew so well as I—on that Christmas night, many years ago.

"To my great surprise, I heard his cheerful voice in the hall on that evening. 'Kind and thoughtful,' I said to myself, 'he has come to show the family he has not forgotten them in their trouble.'

"The evening passed, and about ten o'clock I felt very drowsy——"

"Wanted winding up," suggested the Standard.

"And was just nodding off, when I heard footsteps.

"Listen to me for one moment longer," said Frank's voice, in very different tones, though. I could not have imagined him capable of such earnestness. 'I will not dare to speak of my

own feelings. I only ask you to consider yourself, and not to send me away for ever. I will wait any time you chose for your decision.'

" 'I have told you,' said Phœbe, 'that my decision is made. Why urge me any further? It is cruel!—it is cruel!—un-generous!'

"She spoke so vehemently, and with such evident annoyance, that I saw I had been wrong, and that she really disliked him.

"Frank seemed turned to stone. Never shall I forget his look. Joy seemed crushed out of him for ever by her words.

"Then, in an instant—before Phœbe could speak again, even to say, 'Good-bye!'—he was gone—down the stairs—out of the house.

"Phœbe looked as if in a dream. She walked up to her room, so slowly, so heavily—passing her hand so wearily over her brow—I suppose she felt pained to have grieved Frank; but certainly she did not love him now."

"And did you not ever hear the end of the story?" said the Jar, after waiting impatiently for the Clockcase to continue.

"A few days after their miserable parting, everything was sold off, and I was purchased by a near relative of my late owner, and placed here. I have often seen Phœbe since; but never Frank. So I imagine they have not made up their quarrel. It seems an absurd fancy," added the Clockcase, "but when the hall-door opened just now—I thought I heard his voice."

"I remarked that there was an arrival," said the Standard; "but you were most likely deceived about the voice."

"I protest I am quite disappointed," said the Jar. "I don't call a tale a tale that does not finish. Really, my old friend, you should consider my nerves—they are so extremely delicate and friable in texture, that this awakened sympathy and anxiety will materially disturb their repose."

The Standard laughed his hearty laugh.

"Well, I'm rejoiced to be a masculine. I haven't got any

nerves, that I know of. Why, you might saw me in two, and I shouldn't mind the sensation half as much as you would the noise, I expect, madam."

The Jar shuddered, and murmured something about the *brusquerie* of untravelled timber; but the Standard, wisely considering that she was cracked, and, therefore, not quite accountable, did not reply.

There was a prolonged silence on the landing.

Then the Jar, who, though so fractious and easily upset, had no toughness or obstinacy of disposition, observed, condescendingly—

"Have you no recollections to impart to us, Mr. Standard."

"Me, ma'am?" said the Standard, "ha! ha! ha! that is a good joke!" and he laughed till all the short, fat ballusters creaked again. "Why, I could not tell a story, if you'd pay me; besides, I'm—too solid. I never notice anything. In my youth I was so chopped, and sawn, and carved, and knocked about, that I've no feeling left. I'm too tough for sentiment, ma'am, and as for imagination—oh! oh! oh! But still, I think if that young woman loved that young man, she took a curious way of showing it."

The Clockcase had appeared lost in thought ever since his last observation. He now said "Hush!" so suddenly and decisively, that his hearers started.

A door in the hall opened. A young lady ascended the stairs, and paused before the Clockcase.

What a world of misery in her pale face and large brown eyes!

The door opened again. Almost immediately a gentleman sprang upstairs, and stood beside her.

His face was as agitated as hers; but he did not look unhappy.

He took both her hands, and drew her to the window-seat.

"Phœbe! can it be possible that after all you do not hate me?"

Phœbe did not answer, but her head bent still lower over the hands that Frank held.

But he was resolved.

"There must be no more doubt between us. Here you must

—you shall tell me—whether the agony you inflicted a year ago was intentional, or whether I mistook you.”

“If I tell you, you will hate me.”

Frank let go her hands, and stood in front of her—his arms firmly crossed over his chest.

“Phoebe, I can bear this no longer! Last Christmas night I asked you to be my own dear wife; my infatuation or vanity made me believe that you in some measure returned the devoted love I felt for you. You refused me, with scorn and anger. Since then, do not ask me how life has passed? It has been a dream of misery—purposeless, objectless—all for which I had so long been toiling suddenly drifted from me. Yesterday a few lines from your mother made me come here to-night. Just now, before you left the room so hastily, a look of yours made me almost believe that you cared for me, and that, in mad hastiness, I had sentenced myself to a year’s agony. Now, I am again full of doubt. In common humanity, if nothing else, answer me!”

He clasped his hands, beseechingly.

Phoebe rose; she took his hands in both hers, and, bending her head to them, she murmured,—

“Forgive me! I love you—I loved you then.”

Frank seemed to forget his anxiety for an explanation. He threw both his arms round her, and kissed her, and thanked her, and called her his own darling, in such a wild, excited manner, that the Jar began to feel uncomfortable, and wish his raptures had come to an end.

Phoebe soon interrupted him—

“Stay, dearest; I am afraid that you will not love me, when you know all. Do you remember, when I was a child, warning me about my pride. I nearly conquered it then, but it grew again; and when, last year, you asked me so lovingly to be your wife, the Demon whispered that you only pitied us, and offered me a home from charity. Oh, Frank, dear Frank, can you forgive

this? I have suffered miserably—I am miserable now. Do not despise me—do love me still, though I have made you so wretched!”

“Poor darling!” said Frank, as he pressed her fondly to his heart; “you have suffered the most—and now you have made me too happy ever to breathe a word of blame.”

“Bravo!” said the Standard, when Frank had tenderly led Phoebe into the drawing-room; “I like that sort of thing.”

“I am sorry I cannot agree with you,” said the Jar, with much severity. “I do not approve of any young lady telling a man she loves him, in that decided manner, before she is married to him. It is—not to use a strong word—far too impulsive and unconventional. Do you not think so?” she added appealingly to the Clockcase.

“No!” he replied. “It is the least atonement she can offer for her foolish pride. And I hope that, throughout her life, Phoebe may never forget it.”

“Just so,” cried the Standard. “A very striking remark, old friend. Sorry to differ from a lady, ma’am, especially on Christmas night, and on a lady’s conduct”—and no doubt the hearty old fellow would have bowed, if he could—“but that young woman’s a trump, I think, for what she’s just done. And now, if the company are agreeable, let’s go to sleep!”

The Revenge of the Flowers.

(FROM THE GERMAN OF FREILICHGATH.)



DEEPLY sunk in sweetest slumber,
On her pillows lay a Maid ;
O'er her cheek the warm blood mantles,
Through the dark-brown lashes' shade.

On a rush stool, close beside her,
Stands a Cup of porcelain rare
In the Cup are flowers fresh gathered,
Variegated, fragrant, fair.

Damp and heavy brood the vapours
Though the sultry, perfumed air ;
Fast is closed each door and window,
No cool breezes enter there.

Deep the stillness—not a murmur—
Hark !—a sudden, fluttering sound !
From the flowers and their leaflets
Gentle whispers rustle round.

From the chalices up-starting,
Shadowy perfumed faces see ;
Like a silver mist their garments—
Crowns and shields their emblems be.

From the Rose's crimson centre
Springs a Dame of graceful mien ;
'Mid her locks, all loosely flowing,
Pearls like dew are glittering seen.

From the Monkshood's cowed resemblance
Starts a Knight, armed cap-à-pie ;
Sword and casque all brightly glittering,
Through the dark-green foliage see :

Silver-grey the heron's feather
Nodding on his haughty crest.
Veiled in gossamer, a Maiden
Trembles from the Lily's breast.

From the Turk's-cap comes a Negro,
Striding on with flaunting march ;
Brightly on his gay green turban
Glowes the crescent's golden arch.

Glittering from the Crown Imperial,
Boldly steps a sceptred King ;
See his sword-girt Huntsmen following,
From the azure Iris spring.

From the pale, perfumed Narcissus,
Lo ! a youth, with pensive air,
Nears the bed, and warmest kisses
Presses on the Maiden fair.

Closely round the bed they cluster,
In a wild and mystic ring ;
Round and round the sleeper murmuring,
This the magic lay they sing :—

“ Maiden, Maiden, from the garden,
Thou hast torn us cruelly ;
Placed in this enamelled goblet,
We must languish, wither, die.

“ In our mother’s fond embraces,
Happily we dwelt unseen ;
Oft the sunbeams warm have kissed us,
Glinting through the leafy screen.

“ There the cooling zephyrs fanned us,
As our slender stalks we bowed ;
And at night, our blossoms leaving,
Retelled we, a spirit-crowd.

“ Rain and dew so bright refreshed us—
Here our thirst we cannot slake ;
But, ere all our bloom has withered,
Maiden, our revenge we take !”

Ceased the song, the Spirits circle
Close the sleeper’s head around—
Now again that awful silence,
Followed by a rustling sound.

How they rustle—how they whisper !
Baleful perfume fills the air,
While the Spirits, closely pressing,
Breathe upon the Maiden fair.

Sunbeams through the chamber slanting,
Quick the Spirits pass away ;
On the bed’s soft pillows resting,
Cold and dead the Maiden lay :

Like a withered blossom, lying
’Mid her perished sisters there,
(Still her cheek a soft blush tinges,)
Poisoned by the perfumed air.

The Bat's Nest.

A GAY summer morning spread itself cheerily over the landscape—over the green meadows and the dancing river, whose merry little falls seemed to give it answering smiles—through the beechen wood, where the exquisite young green leaves trembled, with the consciousness of their own loveliness, on their slender, hair-like stems—up a grey scaur mantled with ivy, till it reached a clump of majestic pines, whose sombre aspect seemed to rebuke its exuberance of glee.

Massive trees they were, with spreading, gnarled branches, deep crimson in hue, of true Highland lineage.

Near them a few of inferior race and growth humbly sought shelter.

One pine-tree stood close to this smaller group, somewhat isolated from her loftier kindred. She looked more sombre than any, and as the light summer breeze fitted through her branches, they creaked complainingly.

"My dear cousin," said one of the little Firs, "how discontented you are! when everything this bright morning seems beaming with joy. Even the birds sang their early song of praise more gaily. Why, the fresh, green dress of our old friend, the Beech there, is quite pleasant to look at. What a change in it since yesterday!"

"And that is just one of my griefs," murmured the Pine. "Every year she is indulged with a new and beautiful garment, changing in autumn to the most glorious colours—gold, crimson,

orange, all blending in rich confusion—while we have to wear the same homely dress for four or five years ; or, if we make any change, it is scarcely worth mentioning.”

“ But you seem entirely to forget that we may wear it all the winter, while the poor Beech shivers and trembles as the keen wind pierces through her heart at his pleasure : besides, what a fright she looks without any foliage ! No, no ; give me moderate beauty, always the same, rather than your exquisite charms for but six months in the year.”

“ But this monotony worries my life out,” said the Pine, fretfully. “ It is not *life*, in fact—it is simple existence. Oh, dear, dear ! if I could but find the way to vary it ! ”

One night the Pine-tree heard a gentle murmur near her. She looked around ; all her companions were sound asleep in the moonlight.

“ Who speaks to me ? ” said she, in a timid voice ; for she was by no means a strong-minded Pine, spite of her size.

“ Look at your feet,” replied the whisper, “ and you will see a friend, who longs to be of service to you.”

At the foot of her stem the Pine beheld a slender spray of Ivy.

“ I heard you,” it continued, “ lamenting the uniformity of your colour and general appearance, and, with some labour, I detached myself from yonder rock, and have gradually crept here, to see if I cannot aid you.”

“ You help me ! ” laughed the Pine, erecting her stately head. “ Well !—why, you look like a little weed. I cannot imagine how you and I can sympathise.”

The Ivy writhed slightly.

“ Were you not longing for gayer clothing ? If you would permit me to ascend your stem, I could soon make a vast change in your appearance,” said he, in an insinuating tone.

“ But you might interfere with the grace of my form,” said the vain Pine ; “ and besides, your leaves would be admired, perhaps, more than mine.”

"You mistake," said the insidious climber; "I have no separate existence—once supported by your branches, with whose exquisite grace, allow me to observe, I should not at all interfere, I become an integral part of you, and lose my being in yours."

"And what reward do you expect for this?" said the Pine, who was rather of a suspicious nature.

"The happiness of being constantly with you, of pressing you fondly in my arms. Are not those sufficient? If you only knew how long and hopelessly I have adored you!"

The Pine blushed, till her branches looked redder than ever.

"You are very presumptuous," said she. "I must consider the matter, and will tell you what I think about it to-morrow."

The Pine tree could not go to sleep; her sap rushed up and down in the most excited, uncomfortable manner. Here was a lover at last, who had been sighing for her, perhaps, for months. Her inflammable nature was fairly alight. He was small and insignificant, certainly; but then he was the first who had ever professed such ardent devotion. She could keep it to herself no longer; in fact, admiration is not worth having, unless some one else is aware of it. So she creaked and creaked until she waked up her cousin, the sturdy little Fir.

"Ya—ah!" gaped he. "What's the matter! Is the wood on fire?"

"Don't be silly," answered she, sharply; "I waked you up to have a little chat; you might be grateful for such a mark of favour; I know some one who would, instead of yawning like a ripe cone. I want to consult you."

The Fir, being quite a youngster, felt so complimented at the notion of being consulted by his tall, handsome cousin, of whom he was a warm, though undeclared admirer, that he forgot his displeasure at such an unceremonious awakening.

"I—protest," he began.

"There, now, you are wanted to listen, not to talk," said the Pine.

And she related to him what had passed between herself and the Ivy.

"You are much handsomer as you are, than encumbered with a nasty, venomous parasite," he replied, crossly.

"Oh, you're jealous, are you? and afraid, besides, that I shall grow handsomer than ever?"

The Fir was about to make an angry rejoinder, when a sharp, shrill cry attracted his attention; and close beside him he saw a Bat, whose long ears were quivering with malicious delight at the cousins' dispute. His bright, quick eyes gleamed mischievously, first at the Pine, and then at the Fir.

"I shan't ask you what you are quarrelling about, of that my long ears have already informed me," cried he, whirling round and round, and finally, with a sudden swoop, settling on the Fir. "Why, you foolish little fellow, do you suppose your cousin asked your advice before she'd taken her own on the subject? Bless your resinous little heart! all she wanted was to hear her own opinion in some one else's mouth."

"But how could I know what that was," said the Fir, "till she told me?"

"That's just what I mean," said the Bat, interrupting himself to snap at an unlucky chafer. "Why didn't you find out what she thought first?"

"Really, sir," said the Pine, who was as touchy as tinder, "you interfere, and discuss my affairs very freely. I suppose, when I asked my cousin's advice, I meant what I said; and I certainly did not ask yours."

"Most charming Pine," said the Bat, "what need for you, gifted alike with beauty and wit, to seek counsel of any. Follow the dictates of your own loving nature, and make my friend truly blest."

And off skimmed the Bat, uttering a succession of eerie shrieks of laughter, and tumbling over and over himself with delight, in his aerial evolutions.

"Friend Ivy, I have done your business for you," chuckled he; "and when you've reached the topmast branches of that conceited Pine, you owe me a comfortable winter shelter."

The Ivy rapidly ascended the Pine-tree's massive stem, and at first her delight in his glossy green leaves was unbounded; but as she felt them gradually taking the place of her own foliage—which day by day disappeared beneath the clustering masses of her adorer—she began to feel as discontented as ever, and intimated gently to the Ivy that he was growing rather too fast.

The Ivy tried flattery to quiet her; but finding she had a more decided will than he expected, he appealed to her common sense.

"It seems so unreasonable," said he, "to allow me to take up my abode with you, to forsake all else for you, and now, because you tire of me, to seek a divorce; but I believe the female heart to be incapable of constant affection."

"There's a difference between constancy and slavery," said the Pine, proudly tossing her yet free branches; but as she did so, she felt how firm was the grasp of her insidious lover, and added more humbly, "I fear, in the end, that if you go on increasing in size as you have done, I shall be suffocated."

"How would you like me to leave you to your former ugliness," said the Ivy, judiciously, "the jest and scorn of all your sisters, who, you well know, have been bursting with envy at your additional charms? I daresay one of them would be delighted to receive me, supposing I could be so base as to desert you. My dearest love, trust to me, and all will be well."

False shame and undiminished vanity kept the poor half-stifled Pine silent. Gradually she felt a strange compression in all her limbs; her pulse beat more and more languidly; a dull, heavy sensation at her heart prevented speech. She gasped and panted for air; but the selfish Ivy, although he must have been aware of her sufferings, affected complete unconsciousness. His object was attained; he had secured a permanent and lofty

support for his luxuriant foliage, and by the time the last vestige of the Pine vanished from sight, her heart had ceased to beat. The Ivy remained master of the field; he spread his branches wider and wider, and covered them with rich yellow blossoms, whose delicate perfume attracted myriads of insects that would never have sought the leafless Pine-tree. How he exulted in the success of his scheme!

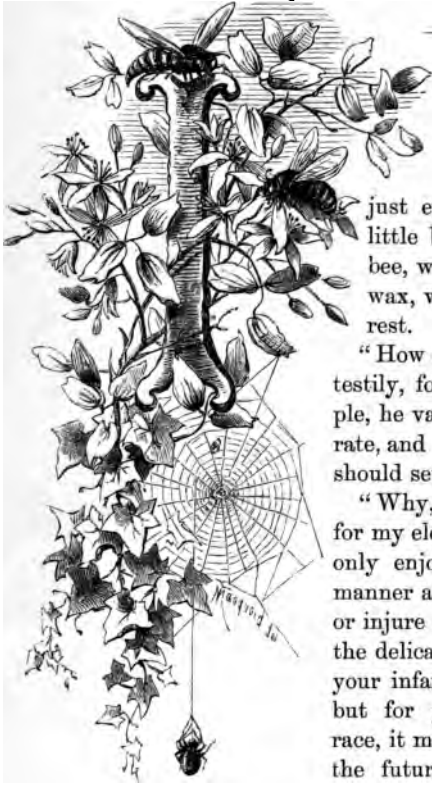
But the Ivy was not left long in undisputed possession. Our old friend the Bat came skimming along one evening, and established himself snugly among his friend's clustering leaves.

"Ha! ha!" he shrieked joyously; "just as I hoped and said. What a famous house you've made for me, friend Ivy!"

The latter, who had preferred the Pine to the Scaur, as being so much cleaner and more airy, was grievously chagrined when the Bat took to himself a long-eared mate, even more selfish than himself. The deceased Pine was avenged. Foul night-birds also made holes for themselves in the lofty eyrie. The Bats multiplied rapidly, and gambolled nightly round the tree in mazy dances, chasing their prey with discordant sounds of exultation and delight; and Papa Bat being of a convivial turn, the slumbers of the unhappy Ivy were thus unceasingly disturbed by the shrill cries and eldritch laughter of the revellers of the Bat's Nest.

Hibe and Het Hibe.

AN APOLOGUE.



It is such a pity to see well-intentioned people waste valuable time!" observed a dandified Wasp, one morning (he having just employed himself in stinging a little boy), to a persevering Worker-bee, who was gathering materials for wax, without pausing for a moment's rest.

"How do you mean?" returned the Bee, testily, for, like many hard-working people, he valued his labours at their highest rate, and felt exasperated that anyone else should set less store by them.

"Why," replied the Wasp, "for me and for my elegantly-dressed companions, who only enjoy ourselves in a gentleman-like manner all day, and never soil our fingers, or injure our complexions with hard work, the delicate waxen cells in which you rear your infant colony might be appropriate; but for your common-place mechanical race, it must be such a bad preparation for the future; it seems, besides, cruel to raise the mind to higher refinement than it can afterwards enjoy."

Our poor Bee, already over-fatigued and weary, felt too much annoyed to reply (the waxy state he was in may have had some-

thing to do with this); so he went on steadily with his work. The self-complacent Wasp continued:—

“If people would only consult common sense a little more, and inclination less, they would be much wiser.”

The Bee, who was, in the main, good-tempered, although cross if interfered with—as really most of us are when we recognise no lawful authority in the fault-finder—now felt sufficiently calm to reply:—

“That depends upon what common sense really is; but, generally, everybody seems to prefer their own, and a good many, like you, preach it as the only genuine article; and yet I see numbers of these common-sense preachers as much the creatures of impulse as those of a more excitable temperament. Besides, it is very amusing to hear you, who know nothing of life—who never yet earned a meal—laying down the law to my practical experience!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed the Wasp. “Nothing like bee’s-wax, eh?”

“My notion of common sense,” said a lovely Red Admiral Butterfly, that was hovering gracefully round the flower the Bee had buried his nose in, “is to enjoy ourselves each in our own way, and believe that each is as wise as his neighbour. I could not work, it would kill me; but I do not pity you, my friend Bee, for having to do it; and though all work and no play certainly does make Jack a particularly dull boy, still, there are many Jacks, I dare say, who would find my joyous existence very burdensome.”

And the Butterfly, already tired of talking, sailed off in quest of gayer companions; now extracting honey from the China-asters, then soaring almost out of sight, now coming down again quite unexpectedly, fluttering its black and scarlet wings on a massive clump of white phlox, in the centre of the garden.

But the Wasp, who could have argued the hind leg off a mule, noddled his flat, brainless head, and pertinaciously continued:—

"I cannot see why you don't build your nests as we do."

"We build ours more honestly," said the Bee; "we only prey upon flowers, while you plunder mankind. I have often seen some of your comrades undermining a window-sill, to get the fibres for this famous cardboard nest you seem so proud of; and besides, even if the young could be reared in it, it would not hold honey, and that you know."

"It is quite as strongly made as your comb," said the Wasp, "and of far more costly materials. There is a French proverb, '*Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*,' and this applies to you, my friend."

"I deny it altogether," said the Bee, making a great buzzing in his flower—possibly the French annoyed him. "You only build for yourselves—we for mankind and for posterity. How could our young ones live *honestly*, I should like to know, Mr. Wiseacre, if we did not provide nourishment for them; and what receptacles so fit as our delicate waxen cells? 'Do your best,' is our motto; and but for the continual polish and refinement you complain of in the structure of our cells, we should never make them well. Practice makes perfect."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Wasp to himself—he had his own good reasons for not mortally offending the Bee. "The notion of that dusky, dirty little fellow living in such an orderly, refined palace as I believe he does, and of my elegant person having no more tasteful abode than our rough-sided nest! However, as I told him, the materials of it are more costly, that is one comfort."

And the Wasp flew on, idling the day away, eating and drinking of the best that the garden afforded, and criticising his neighbours.

His attention was next drawn to a painstaking Spider, who was carrying his delicate gossamer network from some clustering ivy-leaves to an adjacent lilac-tree, about two feet distant.

Most people would have gazed admiringly on the marvellous fineness of the threads, and their exquisite geometrical arrangement.

Not so our busy idler. "Friend Spinner," said he, keeping however, at a discreet distance from the web, "don't you know that, the first time the gardener passes this way, he will decidedly brush your delicate lace-work to the ground? Can't you live in a smaller house, or, at any rate, in one less elaborately ornamented? It seems such a pity to spend so much time and labour on that which is perishable."

"Mind your own business!" said the Spider, venomously, body, legs, and web quivering with rage. "You can't make anything pretty yourself, and that is one reason why you have no admiration for those who can." And he flung himself, with a sudden jerk, so near to the Wasp, that he took to ignominious flight.

"What an ungrateful set they all are!" said the Wasp. "I try to give them a little wholesome advice—for I believe the foolish creatures think more of beauty, and elegance, and nicety, than of eating and drinking and smart clothes—the real necessities of existence—and all I reap is contempt."

A cold autumn succeeded the genial summer, and then—a freezing winter.

The Wasp, the Bee, and the Spider, all perished. But the Bee had well and untiringly lent his aid to form the splendid honey-comb his hive had yielded, and had gathered, besides, an ample store of bee-bread.

Many a thoughtful mind had pondered over the Spider's exquisite tracery.

While of the Wasp no record remained but—the mark of his sting.

The Plate-Basket.

THE corner door of the Sideboard was left half open—so that the Plate-basket, for once, had a good view of the room. It rustled and creaked, and felt as curious as it was possible for it to feel—not very much though, of course, for curiosity is a vulgar attribute, and nothing so wealthy as a Plate-basket could be vulgar—that is an understood fact.

It looked all round at the tables and chairs and carpet, and turned up its nose at all—but most of all at the pictures.

“Poor creatures!” he said; “how ashamed they must feel of their sham gilt frames!” and he turned for relief to look at the shining bowls of the gold spoons in one of his capacious divisions.

There was a little Sugar-basin close by, who peeped to see what was outside also.

“Bless us!” said the Basket, “what a deal of time and thought seems to be wasted by some people! Look at that foolish Match-box, with a network of gilding halfway up—all sham, you know, all sham. The pattern is pretty, I dare say—I can’t say *I* see it—but who cares for prettiness that’s worth nothing? ‘What’s it worth?’ is my motto, about everything. Make as good a show as you like—there’s nothing like show now-a-days; but let it be with costly solid materials; none of your imitative elegance for me.”

The Sugar-basin was elegantly shaped and engraved, with armorial bearings besides. She fidgeted, as if touched on a tender point.

"My dear friend, I think, with you, we should all be worth something; but may we not combine beauty of form and—ahem!"—she cleared her throat here—"other claims to distinction, with richness of material?"

"Oh, I see what you're after!" said the Plate-basket. He really was not choice in his language; but many wealthy people have this peculiarity. "I suppose you mean, your antiquity's worth something—I wouldn't give an osier twig for it! Why, look at me; I'm worth more than anything in the house, and yet I'm bran new—don't even know who my father and mother were. Don't talk to me of antiquity, it makes me sick! Why, look at me; you're not intrinsically worth so much as a plain basin at the same price would be, my lady!" and he laughed in a very rude manner.

The Sugar-basin was rather shocked; but she was one of an old impoverished family, and she thought wealthy people ought to be indulged in their little eccentricities; so she continued her survey of the room.

"Why, my good friend, there is surely a relative of yours."

"Where?" said the Plate-basket, gruffly. He was not fond of relations generally—they seldom do one much credit, and are inconvenient appendages.

"I mean that pretty basket full of flowers on the table; how graceful its shape is!"

"It cost about five shillings, I suppose," sneered the Plate-basket, "flowers and all. I wonder people are not ashamed to have such rubbish about their rooms; and what's the use of flowers? My relation, indeed! I wonder he's not ashamed of so trifling an employment—an employment that gives him no weight or position whatever—that identifies him with mere pretty uselessness. Oh, don't talk to me! what can there be to admire in anything that's not expensive?"

The Plate-basket rattled his spoons and forks, and seemed to hug himself in the comfort of being so rich and respectable.

The Flower-basket heard all that passed, only it didn't answer; it hated rudeness, and thought the Plate-basket would be sure to get the best of the argument; but it looked lovingly at the flowers.

"Beautiful creatures!" he thought; "how much rather would I possess your loveliness, fading as it may be, than the senseless lumps of metal my cousin values himself on! Even as you fade, some of you acquire a fresh charm; and what a never-ending variety among you! Many of you lean lovingly down and caress me for the support I give. I may be poor, and not 'worth anything,' but what life can equal the happiness of mine?"

A large white *Convolvulus*, whose pure blossoms were filled with cool green shadow, pressed its long pendent sprays more closely round the Basket as he spoke, and the fragrant white-bosomed Rose blushed with pleasure.

"Ah!" sighed the Flower-basket, in the delirium of its happiness, "gold and silver cannot do *that*, cousin Mammon!"

Dear me! the Flower-basket was very silly; as if the same thing ever makes three people happy, and as if the Plate-basket did not take just as much pleasure in counting his spoons and looking at their glitter, in calculating their cost, and, above all, in thinking how much consequence they gave him in the eyes of the world, as he himself did in the service of grace and beauty and in their love.

But the Sideboard door was soon shut up, and the Plate-basket was left in the dark—alone, too, for the silver Sugar-basin had been taken out, as it was tea-time.

This was really a pity—for I have no doubt, had there been any one to listen to it, the Plate-basket would have made various useful and instructive observations relative to the virtue and wisdom of the wealthy, and the folly and want of common sense of the poor.

I can't tell how it happened—it was very forgetful of the housemaid—but though she took the silver Sugar-basin upstairs,

she quite forgot the Plate-basket. He had fallen sound asleep, so he had not noticed the omission.

Suddenly, he was roused up by a curious grinding sound—grind—grind—a whispering, and then a cautious tread, as if of muffled feet.

The Sideboard door was forced open, and the bull's-eye of a dark lantern thrown on him.

"Ah!" he thought, "here are people come, possibly, from some distance, and at night too, to contemplate my possessions. What a thing it is to be worth something!"

He was surprised to feel a rough grasp on his handle. A voice whispered close to him—

"Best make off with this, Bill—there's a stir overhead."

And, in an instant, our Plate-basket found himself carried along at a most uncomfortable speed. How the spoons and forks did bump and bruise his fat, well-padded sides! He had no breath to speak, or he would have told the man that people of wealth and position were not accustomed to such rough treatment.

Presently they stopped, and all crouched down behind a hedge. They set the Plate-basket down on something soft and wet. .

"Mercy me, what's this!" thought he. "I haven't felt anything like it since I was woven—though I think I was rather used to it before."

After much whispering and muttering, one man—the same who had first seized it—took several large spoons from the Basket.

"Aha! he'll be rather surprised when he feels how heavy they are, I reckon. Why, what on earth's the man about? putting them in his pocket—in his vile dirty coat-pocket! Here, I say—murder!—robbers!—treason! How dare he touch anything belonging to me?"

But the men paid no attention to him; you see, their education had been neglected. In less than five minutes, they had filled their pockets with the contents of the Plate-basket.

"What's to be done with this here?" said one, kicking our friend as he spoke. "It ain't worth a rap to us; but it won't do to leave it here—it'll blow on us, if it's found close to the road."

"Burn it," suggested another.

"I don't believe you could stow it snugger than in that dung-heap," said Bill. "Here, make a hole, and I'll shove it in, so as, I'll undertake, it don't tell no tales in a hurry."

The Plate-basket listened breathlessly. "Not worth anything!" What did they mean? He, the most valuable thing in the house.

"Well, it's dark," he said. "They can't see me; so I must make some allowance. But what use can the spoons be without me? Put me in a dung-heap, too! Ah, and they're right, there is one close by. How disgusting! I shall be sick, to a dead certainty." He gasped as he heard Bill's proposal. "The last refuge of the poor and the outcast—it's impossible such a thing could happen to me."

Here the barking of a dog alarmed the thieves, and they started off again as fast as possible, without burying the unhappy Plate-basket; to whom, however, Bill, muttering a fierce oath, gave a parting kick that sent it several yards further—where the ditch in which they had been crouching was no longer mud, but nearly full of foul stagnant water.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" he screamed, as the water bubbled into his inside, "I can't bear it; I shall take cold in my head. Oh! I'm sure I'm going to sneeze! Oh! was ever anybody more deserving of pity—pity, how can I talk such nonsense? pity is only for the poor. No, no; no one would venture to pity me. Pouf! how nasty this water smells!"

When morning came, the ditch looked drearier than ever; one could scarcely call the sluggish ooze that filled it water, it was so slimy and choked with weeds. Presently something stirred its surface, and a great fat Newt tumbled into our Plate-basket.

"Get out, you nasty, unpleasant reptile! what do you mean by taking such a liberty? Do you think all this soft padding was made for your ugly yellow sides? Get out, I say!"

But the Newt only laughed, and settled itself more snugly in the Basket.

"I don't know what you are," he chuckled; "you look like



an over-fed dock-leaf, but you're uncommonly comfortable, let me tell you; and you may stay here as long as you like."

And the Newt curled himself round, and went fast asleep in the Plate-basket.

For several days the (now poor indeed) Basket lay in the ditch. He remained near the surface, entangled in a growth of rank weeds.

But his padded lining gradually became rotten and detached, and the bruise which the burglar's foot had inflicted soon increased to a great hole in his side.

One morning he was roused from the lethargy of misery into which he had sunk, by hearing two small voices in high dispute—

“Tell'ee I will get in it, Joe, and have a sail.”

“Tell'ee 'ee can't—there be a hole in it big enough to put your head in.”

“Well, but do get it out for us, Joe, won't 'ee?” implored the younger boy. “Maybe, there's some use in it.”

“'Tain't of no use 'cept for this,” said the other boy, when, with much labour, he had succeeded in dragging the Basket out of the weeds and muddy slime; and, setting it on the level ground, he kicked the dirty, dilapidated thing along, until it became a shapeless mass of rubbish.

“Ah!” sighed he, with his last breath, “to be kicked to pieces by poor ragged boys is indeed a degradation!”



The Useless Little Hands.

HERE was, once on a time, a little girl, who had two pretty little fat, white Hands, but, sad to say, they were of no use to her. I do not mean to say that, if there were flowers to be plucked, or fruit to be gathered, or sugar-plums to be eaten, or sundry bits of mischief to be achieved, the little Hands were not useful. Oh, no—no small fingers could be quicker at such work; but if Janet were told to change her shoes or her pinafore, or do anything really useful, the poor ignorant little Hands never could find out which way to set to work. Perhaps they never tried, or, if they did, the Head never helped them, but went on thinking of something else.

She was a very useless little girl.

One day, Janet had been in trouble before dinner. The poor little Hands had not performed anything that was

expected of them—all had gone wrong. She felt angry with herself and everybody else, and as soon as she could she slipped away from the table, and wandered disconsolately round the garden.

The sun was very hot, so she soon tired of walking about, and seated herself in a shady nook, close to a beautiful rose-tree.

She had nothing to do, and did not wish to do anything. She presently grew drowsy and fell asleep. But she was roused from her nap by a hum of voices close beside her.

"How can I ever thank you, dear Rose," said a little yellow Musk-flower, "for the kind shelter you give me? The fierce sun's rays would not have left me one green leaf; but he cannot penetrate your thick foliage, although he tries his best."

"Dear Musk," said the Rose, "I often wish I could be more useful; it is such a slight service that I am able to render—only just to spread my leaves wider when I see your enemy's rays beaming too fiercely on your delicate head. Do you know, I sometimes feel envious of some of our cousins, who have the power of making themselves useful. Look at the Clematis and giant Convolvulus, at the other end of the walk—what a cool fragrant bower their sheltering arms have formed for our dear mistress! Really, I felt quite jealous this morning, when, on her return from that poor old Scotch body's cottage, she seated herself for a few moments, and gazed up into the snowy tubes of the Convolvulus; their cool green shadows must have refreshed her after her dusty walk; and then she gathered a few of the sweet-scented Clematis flowers—it made me feel that I, alas! can be of no service to her, but to ornament the garden!"

"And shelter me, dear friend. But how do you know that our mistress went to see anyone this morning?" inquired the little Musk, whose yellow flowers expanded with eager curiosity.

"I went with her," said the Rose. "My spirit lives in each one of my blossoms, and till they wither I am ever present within them. Our mistress gathered several of my freshest flowers as she passed through the garden. She opened a small side gate

and went down a pretty lane on the opposite side of the way. We soon came to an old thatched cottage; the state of the little garden in front, overgrown with rank shepherd's purse and couch-grass, told that it was at present neglected, although the honeysuckle, trained round the porch, showed that some cultivation had been once bestowed on it. We climbed a creaking staircase, and, after tapping at the door, entered a small airy room. An old woman lay on a bed; from her face and complexion, you would not have thought her very ill, but the powerlessness of her attitude and her wasted hands told otherwise."

"Will you speak rather louder, please, dear Rose?" interrupted the Musk, who had stretched her poor little blossoms nearly out of their green cups, in her anxiety not to lose a word of her friend's story. "Between the buzzing and humming of the bees and gnats, I can scarcely hear your soft voice."

The Rose bent her head, diffusing delicious perfume by the movement, and continued:—

"‘How are you, Goody?’ said our mistress, in a bright, kind voice that seemed to cheer the old woman.

"‘Weel, I’m just frail and silly the morn, leddy,’ she answered.

"‘I thought you might be able to fancy an egg for your dinner; and see,’ she said, holding it up, ‘what a fine one I found in the chicken-house as I came along!’

"‘Ye’re always purely kind and guid, my leddy; but it’s na use the day. Joan is gane forth, and willna win back hame before nicht.’

"‘But how were you going to manage all day?’

"‘I hae just a few parridge in the cogie there—that wad hae served richt well.’

"‘Oh, but Goody, I brought the egg on purpose for you. I must see you eat it before I go away.’

"She looked about till she found materials for lighting a fire, and when it had burnt up, she hunted out a little saucepan, and boiled the egg; and the old woman said it was cooked to perfection.

"Now, that is what I call being really useful," said the Rose; "but I have noticed among human beings many who seem only to *possess* hands and feet, but have no idea how to use them, especially in the service of others. Perhaps they forget that *hands* are apt to become lazy, if the *head* does not keep a steady watch over them."

A Gnat, that had been singing round Janet for some minutes, just then stung her sharply.

She roused up with a start from the sort of dream she had been enjoying on the grass-plot, and ran in-doors, wondering very much at all she had heard, and feeling very uncomfortable and disturbed in her mind. To think of flowers, even, being more useful than she was—everything and everybody joining in this cry about usefulness! What could it mean?

She continued in a dreamy, wandering mood through the afternoon, but when it came to undressing time she was really worse than ever. She could not exert herself, even so much as to pull off her socks; and, as to her petticoats, Nurse had to say, three times over—

"Please, Miss Janet, will you step out of your clothes," before the inattentive little creature would rouse herself up to listen.

That night Janet dreamed a very curious dream. It seemed as if she had just lain down in bed.

Nurse said, "Good night," and took away the candle; but still the room was quite light, and looked all in disorder, and yet Janet was certain that Nurse had folded her clothes and set everything straight before she went away. There were her petticoats on the floor just as she had stepped out of them—there was one sock in one corner and the fellow on a chair, just as she had pulled them off. There were her little shoes, lying on their faces anywhere, instead of standing neatly side by side, as Nurse had placed them.

Suddenly she felt a very strange, sharp pain in her wrists—it seemed as if a knife passed through them. She instinctively

tried to touch them; but what was this?—the Hands were gone, and the fingers with them.

Janet sate up in bed; she felt too much puzzled to cry. But as she looked round, to make sure whether she was awake or asleep—what do you think she saw?

Her two pretty little fat white Hands sliding gently over the coverlet. Now they reached the side of the bed, and jumped on the floor.

They did not lie there, though—they began diligently to fold up all the scattered clothes. How neatly and quickly they did it, smoothing each article and giving it a finishing pat. Then they placed the little shoes side by side, turned the socks ready to put on next morning, and finally seemed to be setting some of Janet's untidy drawers to rights.

Janet looked on in breathless wonder. She could not believe her eyes. Could these be the naughty, useless little Hands, that always went so slowly and unwillingly about any useful or unselfish occupation?

Presently they began to talk.

"There," said the Right Hand, "I think we have saved Nurse a good quarter of an hour to-night. She'll not have to sit up so late at needlework, and how pleased Mamma will be when she sees such tidy drawers!"

"And I have helped you bravely, sister, have I not?" said Left Hand.

"You have tried, and that is all that can be expected," said the Right Hand. "Good night."

And clasping each other heartily, the pretty little Hands disappeared.

* * * * *

Next morning, Nurse said she could not tell what had come to Miss Janet—it was quite unaccountable. "She put on her own socks and shoes, and really tried to be helpful in dressing herself."

It was very hard work at first; and the Hands did not do things quite so neatly and cleverly as in the dream, and very often tired before they had nearly fulfilled their duties. But Janet soon found that by fixing her mind resolutely and earnestly on what she was about, instead of letting her thoughts wander just where they pleased, the Hands became quicker and more skilful every day, and by her next Birth-day every one called her "useful little Janet."

The Genteel Cat.

“I WISH, my good friend, if it would not greatly inconvenience you, that you would let me see a little more of the fire, this bitterly cold evening,” quoth a sleek Tabby Cat, as she lay lazily purring on a Turkey rug in front of a blazing fire.

“Well, Tabby, if you can get any closer, you are welcome,” said the black Retriever she addressed; “but, seeing that I have been out all day, while you have been snoozing either here or inside the fender, I don’t think you ought to grumble at me for taking a warm, by way of beginning the evening.”

The Cat was silent; but she glanced sarcastically at Bison’s dirty feet and tail, and licked herself all over by way of contrast.

It would have made anyone’s throat dry to witness the assiduity with which she washed every hair of her grey fur with that nimble, indefatigable tongue, purring cheerfully all the time.

The Dog looked vexed; his honest nature rose against covert sneers.

“I am sorry to be so dirty, Tabby; but I was obliged to follow our master, and you see I have not the same means of cleaning myself that you possess.”

“That’s very true. Few creatures have,” she replied, complacently, for she began to think Bison had some discernment, after all; “at least, I should say—for I abhor vanity—few make the same use of their facilities.” And she purred louder and more cheerfully than ever.

“I wonder,” she continued, lazily, “if, when you are out on these expeditions, you see anything to compensate for getting such a terribly dirty coat?”

"I believe you!" said Bison, jumping up and shaking himself in quite an excited manner.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bison, you really are—what shall I say?—too impetuous! I know it was entirely unintentional, but you have really sprinkled three—positively three—drops of dirty water over my right shoulder! You really have no breeding!" And, of course, she licked herself all over again.

"Well, well," said Bison, rather impatiently, "I should think we did see some beautiful sights to-day, more especially towards evening, when the snow began falling so thickly that I thought Master Tommy's story of the old woman who plucks her geese up in the clouds must be true—the flakes looked like white feathers."

"Do you call that Master Tommy's story?" said the Cat. "I knew that story long before you ever saw Master Tommy!"

"Well," said Bison, somewhat abashed, "anyhow, the snow was wonderful; flake fell fast upon flake. Master was soon covered, and so, I dare say, I was too."

"Ah," Mrs. Tabby interrupted, compassionately, "you should have seen the snow I saw last winter, at Farmer Green's, where my mother lives! You would not have thought much of this fall if you had."

"When every tree," continued Bison, "was clothed in white, every branch seemed to stand out, as if carved in frosted silver; and as to the front-garden, I declare, when we came in, it reminded me of the great cakes I saw last week, when Master took me into town—everything was quite white but the green edging round the large round bed, just like the border of a cake, and the small plants and shrubs stood up like the silver ornaments—so white and still."

"Oh, you admired those cakes, did you? You should see a real London bride-cake! We had one sent down to us when my young Mistress was married. But, however, I daresay you thought those beautiful that you saw last week. Where igno-

rance is ~~bliss~~—I've heard people say—there's no use in knowing better." And she licked herself carefully again.

The Dog winced a little. Good-natured as he was, he wished Tabby would keep her opinions to herself, and not snub him so much.

"It was curious," he said, "to see how dirty the rabbits' white tails looked beside the snow. Master shot a brace of them. There they lie in the porch—poor soft little creatures!"

"Do you call a rabbit's skin soft?" said Tabby. "Have you ever noticed the fur of my last kitten?"

"Not I," said Bison, testily. "I hate kittens!"

"Yes; people often dislike what they don't understand," said the Cat; and she sat straight upright, and curled her tail round, and looked pensively into the fire.

"I beg your pardon," said Bison, ashamed of his rudeness. "You are fortunate in possessing children."

"Yes; you see things always go well with those who are steady and careful. Nothing ever goes wrong with me. Now, that unhappy Tortoiseshell in the farm-yard—well, all her last kittens were drowned. I was not at all surprised; I knew how it would be. Spite of all the delicate, friendly hints I was constantly giving her, she always allowed her children to play, and romp, and be as wild as possible. She said she liked the little dears to use their limbs. I really could not allow my genteel, well-trained children to associate with them, and our Mistress, you see, has appreciated the difference. Take my word for it, friend Bison, those on whom the rising sun shines are those who will sun themselves in his departing light; those who are born under a cloud will never emerge from it. Look at my mother and all my family—how respectable and settled they are, and how well they have always managed! Look at my children—what beauty! what grace! what perfect gentility!"

Here her youngest, with the remarkably soft fur, added itself to the group, by taking a flying leap from the top of a high-backed

chair in the chimney-corner, and began, without any show of reverence, to play about her mother, administering, every now and then, a sharp bite to the end of her tail.

The Cat seemed undisturbed—everything belonging to the Tabby family must of necessity do right; but Bison curled himself round, so as to turn his back to the mischievous kitten, who peered curiously at him with her bright round eyes, but was evidently afraid to venture nearer.

Finding that her gambols were not responded to—for Mrs. Tabby was far too decorous to play with her just then—she seated herself upright, in exact imitation of her mother, and began to lick herself in an approved and well-bred fashion.

Bison, as I have said before, was not ill-tempered—although he felt sore at being so continually rubbed the wrong way—but he reflected that probably the constant habit of using her own fur in such a manner, gave Tabby's tongue a specialty in that direction; and he continued his narrative.

"I wonder what you would have said to the rats near Mullin Bridge—how they started and scrambled to their holes when I splashed in among them after Master's bird!"

"And you worried plenty of them, no doubt," said the Cat, enviously licking her lips.

"That would have been more in your way than mine, Tabby; you are kept to destroy vermin, while I should break rules if I even touched a rat when out with our Master."

"I'm not exactly kept to destroy *vermin*—you use strange expressions, sir. I am not a *stable* cat—oh, dear no! my business here, I believe, is to look pretty and genteel, and to make myself as comfortable as I can. Of course I do not permit any mice here; but that is simply from a due regard to the feelings of my Master and Mistress, whose meals would otherwise be disturbed by these thieves. But I manage all this at night, so as to give offence to no one."

"Let us be genteel, or die," muttered the Dog.

"I have my impulses entirely under control," continued the Cat; "no little weaknesses do *I* give way to; but I can scarcely fancy how *you* could restrain your natural impetuosity."

"I don't understand all your long words. I wanted a rat bad enough, I can tell you; but I recollected my duty, and Master's dog-whip, in time."

"Poor fellow!" purred the Cat. "How sadly the inferior nature preponderates, when it can only be restrained by the fear of a beating."

Just then a servant appeared, carrying a smoking dish of fine trout, which he placed on the table, and then withdrew to announce that dinner was served.

Bison rose and shook himself, ready to welcome his Master; but Tabby's eyes dilated fearfully—she sniffed the air and licked her lips; she paced the hearth-rug in visible and anything but well-bred agitation. Presently Bison ran to the door—she could withstand the temptation no longer—she sprang on to the table and began to crunch the head of the largest trout as fast as she could—never heeding the opening door and the entrance of her Master and Mistress.

"Drive Tabby away, and give her a beating for her ill-manners!" exclaimed the Farmer to his servant. "Poor old Bison, you shall go down and have a good supper; you have had a harder run to-day than usual."



FAIRYLAND

PART THE FIRST.

HAD been wandering for some time over a common tangled with brake and blackberry-bushes, when all at once a wall of almost impenetrable verdure rose before me.

With infinite labour I forced my way through a thicket of sloe-bushes, crowned with blossomed honeysuckle and long, trailing briars, and found myself suddenly on enchanted ground — the very place I had been seeking.

I had often heard descriptions of this spot, but had no previous be-

lief that it so well deserved its name of "Fairyland."

The broken, rough ground of the common had given place to a soft lawn of velvet turf, surrounded by an irregular circle of wondrously majestic yew-trees, whose girth evidently betokened a Druidic growth. Their widely-extended branches were so closely

matted with foliage, that the broad glare of the sunshine could only penetrate here and there.

Long vistas opened on every side, along which the graceful brake and clinging briars grew in wild masses, still, every now and then, overshadowed by yew-trees. The daring blackberry sprays had audaciously climbed to the summit of some of these hoary old monarchs of the scene; and, as if overjoyed at their own success, flung their long arms down again to the earth, in search of new exploits.

The gnarled branches and knotted stems of the yew-trees, frosted over with the silvery cup-lichen, suggested a variety of grotesque fancies. Here, one was riven in twain, yet the foliage looked vivid and rich as that of its more perfect brethren. A few steps further on, appeared the most majestic tree I had as yet observed. I felt inclined to rest under his widely-spreading shade, for the August sun was at its fiercest heat; but in walking round the immense trunk, to select a comfortable nook, I was amazed to find that only half of the foliage was really yew; on the other side a wild service-tree sprung about mid-way from the trunk, so that the tree was really double-faced, the tender green of the service contrasting well at the junction with its more sombre neighbour.

So silent and deserted was the place, that, but for the tinkle of a sheep-bell, one might have fancied it unknown to mankind. This set me musing on the mystery of the double-tree. It bore no trace of lightning scathe, and so perfect was the shape of the remaining portion, that it was evident the other half must, some time or other, have been removed—but how? While I sat pondering this difficulty, the sun had gradually disappeared, smiling so warm a farewell, that the whole landscape seemed for a few moments bathed in a bright crimson glow, which quickly yielded to the colder, paler beams of the harvest moon. If the place was beautiful by day, it was something more now. The silver light struggled in more boldly and freely than the golden

rays had succeeded in doing ; and the shadows of the stalwart trees fell in broad dark columns across its bright track.

While I was admiring the exquisite effect of the moonlight on a ring of Fairy seats of all forms and sizes, that seemed to have sprung up in front of me, I suddenly perceived that I was no longer alone.

PART THE SECOND.

Myriads of graceful but tiny elves now traversed the broad open space within the mystic circle of the trees. Gradually they seemed to approach nearer and nearer the spot where in the morning I had remarked the immense shattered trunk which I now, to my surprise, beheld entire. At its base, seated lovingly on the same creamy mushroom, were a pair of lovely elves, wearing diadems of dandelion plumes, to whom all the rest, as they passed in front of them, paid homage. The Fairy King presently clapped his hands loudly, and the merry hum of voices ceased.

"It is our wish," said he, in clear silvery tones, "and that of our dear lady, to reward Chivalry and Skill among you. Several of you, I know, long for distinction ; some few, I fear, thirst for power. Here I offer you a legitimate ambition ; but remember to exercise your talents usefully. The place of chief huntsman at our Fairy court awaits him to whom I adjudge the prize."

Almost before the King's voice had ceased, several eager competitors started forward.

"Stay!" said the King ; "we decide not on your claims to merit till the silver moon shall again be at her full splendour ; till then strive to deserve success. And now," he added, turning to the Queen, and courteously and lovingly assisting her to descend from the throne, "let affairs of state give place to mirth and revelry."

With a blade of feathery grass, that seemed to serve him for a sceptre, he struck a tall foxglove, under which he now stood.

Instantly its numerous bells struck up the merriest music imaginable, more like silvery peals of laughter than any mortal dance music, and yet harmonising perfectly with the twining, graceful evolutions of the Fairy dancers.

Everywhere shone the tiny lamps of countless glow-worms, while bright golden-winged beetles whirled about, apparently sharing the general merriment.

Under the shade of an umbrageous mushroom, a pair of lovers had stolen away from the revel, and were reading their fortunes in the mystic blossoms of the St. John's wort; beneath whose broad leaves a mischievous urchin was seated, busily engaged in draining a goblet of hoar cup-lichen filled with nectarous dew, which seemed in great request among the dancers.

Several of the young elves of the hobble-de-hoy class amused themselves in climbing the ladder-like blackberry sprays I had remarked in the morning; on which some swung merrily to and fro, while others strove together which should climb the quickest; and they shouted with wild delight when one less fortunate than his fellows pricked himself so smartly as to lose his hold just as he had reached the summit.

Around the Royal pair a group still lingered. "Look at Pau-kee," said one, "how enviously he eyes Lazor and Yefrid; till lately he was high in the King's favour, but his vain wish to be preferred to all, has at last disgusted even our gentle Sovereign."

"Lazor and Yefrid are not clever at all, though," said the blue-eyed Fairy to whom this speech was addressed.

"No, they are not clever; but they are bright, happy, and loving, and are quite unselfish; and I should like to know how we should get on without some butterflies among us. If we were all as clever as Pau-kee, why, I think I'd rather be a squirrel at once."

The object of these remarks was a diminutive, but very remarkable-looking Fairy; his dark eyes, full of restless fire, seemed ever seeking something beyond his power to attain. Occasionally he cast an envious glance on two bright beings who

stood close beside the Queen, and whom she addressed as Lazor and Yefrid.

"Why do you not join the dancers?" said she; "I shall begin to think you are growing self-satisfied, and deem dancing unworthy of you."

"Rather, dearest lady," said Yefrid, "believe us unwilling to leave your Royal presence for any lesser enjoyment."

The Queen smiled graciously, and then turned to the dark-eyed sprite. "Pau-kee," said she, "I know disdains dancing; though surely one so universally wise must excel even in so mean an accomplishment;" and she laughed with a spice of true feminine malice, for she knew that Pau-kee was by no means a graceful dancer, and therefore did not care to attempt it. He was, moreover, so wrapped up in himself that he had never paid the Queen the slightest compliment, and—(like her mortal sisters, who will pardon conceit in a really clever man, provided he worships them a little, and who value this reluctant homage far more than the sedulous admiration of any empty-pated Adonis)—she felt piqued at his indifference to her charms.

"Your pardon, Madam," said Pau-kee, sarcastically; "I was considering the words of our gracious Sovereign."

"And meditating how to achieve so stupendous an undertaking," laughed the Queen.

"By no means difficult, Madam, I should hope, if Lazor and Yefrid are also competitors," replied Pau-kee.

"You need not disdain my faithful squires; if there be aught of chivalry or generosity in the emprise, I feel confident of their success."

She turned from Pau-kee somewhat haughtily, and, followed by her gay train, mingled with the dancers.

He gazed after her, while a dark frown overspread his features. "How long," he muttered, "is mind to be subject to such empty puppets as these? This must end. I will assert my sovereign power of intellect, or perish!"

And he disappeared amid the bracken.

The fascination of the revel was at its height. Loving glances were interchanged more and more rapidly, and yet more lingeringly among the dancers; they clasped each other more closely in their graceful waltz; when a shrill crowing sound crashed in amid the sweet flowery music. Instantly a gauze-like mist floated over the scene, and all was void and still.

PART THE THIRD.

The moon was again at its full, and again was the Elfin Court assembled within the yew-tree circle.

But there were no sounds of revelry. A breathless silence hung over all, only broken by the whirr of the bats' wings; and now three figures were seen emerging from one of the bracken glades. One obviously slackened his pace, in order to let the others arrive before him.

As they neared the throne, I saw that the two foremost were Lazor and Yefrid, while Pau-kee lingered behind, with a dark, triumphant smile on his handsome features; but his beauty was now that of a fallen spirit—deep lines furrowed his brow, and when he attempted to smile, his lips curled with the sneer of a demon.

"Speak, Lazor and Yefrid," said the King, pointing to a delicately-carved ivory hunting-horn, formed in exact imitation of the woodbine blossom. "Tell us by what deeds you claim this reward."

"Nay, Sire," said Lazor, "I feel I have no claim. Your Majesty told me to go out into the world seeking what good I could do, and I own I found it very difficult not to spend the whole day in enjoying all that is lovely and wondrous on the earth. I fear I can scarcely boast of any gallant or skilful exploit, or any deed done that I can put forth as a claim for so great a reward."

While Lazor spoke, a slight frown overspread the King's face. He had hoped his favourite's goodness would have overcome his butterfly habits. But before he could speak, the mischievous-looking Elf I had noticed before under the hypericum leaves sprung nimbly out of one of the foxglove bells, where he had hidden to hear the decision of the King, and, prostrating himself, he exclaimed:—

“Mercy, gracious Sire, if I speak; but yesterday, I was looking for blackberries, and in so doing I fell into a wasps'-nest, and the spiteful yellow-bodied monsters would have lamed me for life, or perhaps killed me, if Lazor, at great peril, had not rushed upon them, and striking furiously among them with a rush he bore in his hand, dragged me away before they could recover themselves.”

“Since witnesses are permitted to speak,” said the Queen, “or rather,” she continued, smiling graciously on her favourite attendant, “since Lazor is too modest to relate his own good deeds, I must tell your Majesty that I saw him not long ago expend much time and skill, as well as bravery, in freeing a white butterfly from a venomous spider. The toils were so surely wrapped round her, and were, too, of so glutinous a nature, that Lazor, in attempting her deliverance, had well-nigh shared her imprisonment. Three times I saw him turn faint and pale as the poisonous breath of the spider, whose bloated body I could just discern through the leaves, reached him; but he persevered, and as the enraged monster incautiously descended to attack him, Lazor transfixed him with his lance, while the freed captive hovered round him in an ecstasy of gratitude.”

A soft murmur of applause followed the Queen's story, and the King warmly praised Lazor for his brave and loving labours.

Somewhat similar actions were related of Yefrid, who seemed alike modest in proclaiming his own merits; and, after some deliberation, their claims were declared equal.

“Advance, Pau-kee; I see you are the only other claimant,”

said the King, kindly, although the dark, triumphant glance of the Fay, methought, impressed him painfully. Pau-kee had listened to all with a contemptuous smile; he now advanced, and bowed with graceful self-possession.

“I have not spent my time in worthless knight-errantry,” he



said; “your Majesty gave us permission to try skilfully for the prize, and I have been employed in heightening and increasing a store of knowledge and power, which I now propose to put to the proof; but, as seeing is believing, I prefer doing so in this presence, to the testimony of—of—witnesses.” Evidently, had

he dared, he would have qualified the word; but an angry gleam in the Queen's eyes restrained him. The King looked grave.

"I hope your power has no noxious origin or qualities," said he.

A deep red flush passed over Pau-kee's face, and a strange light flashed from his eyes. He had bartered every good and kindly feeling for the power of gratifying his insatiable craving.

"Your Majesty's own intellect is too keen," he said, hypocritically, "to put mere brute-force and good-nature on the same level with its priceless worth. Have I permission to commence?"

The King bowed assent.

Three mystic words issued from Pau-kee's lips, and instantly the half of the majestic tree under which I was lying, and which, to my surprise, I now remarked to be entirely composed of yew, had disappeared.

The King, and all around, looked horror-struck at this wanton destruction of the sacred tree; but before he could interfere, Pau-kee had repeated his incantation, and the noble yew, which had so long overshadowed the Royal throne, was riven in twain; With a triumphant mocking laugh, Pau-kee prepared to display a third proof of his power. But he had overrated its extent, and the forbearance of his sovereign lord.

Almost maddened by the tears that burst from the lovely Queen's eyes, at this cruel destruction of her favourite resting-place, the King struck the foxglove sharply with his sword; a dull, heavy sound issued from it, and the arms of Pau-kee remained as if pinioned to his sides.

A band of armed Fairies, the Royal body-guard, on whose casques the gray monkshood nodded grimly, quickly surrounded him, ready to obey the slightest command of their monarch.

"Unhappy one!" said the King, "thy vanity has wrought thee fearful woe. In the form of a foul bird I condemn thee to haunt this charmed spot for ever. May thy cry serve as a warning to those who prize Knowledge more than Love!"

* * * * *

The Night-Hawk's shrill, rattling cry startled me suddenly. I gazed around; but Pau-kee and the whole Fairy company had disappeared!

The crimson glow of the westering sun was faintly reflected on the risen moon; and, save some creamy circles at the foot of the riven tree, no trace remained of the bright denizens of Fairyland.

“Where there’s a Will, there’s a Way.”

THERE was a nice fire in the kitchen; it made all the pots and pans look as bright as silver; and as to the copper Warming-pan, that hung by the cupboard on one side of the fire, it almost looked like a fire itself—there was such a rosy glow on its round face.

The kitchen was empty, for Cook was upstairs dressing, and the Housemaid, having just brought down the tea-things, had gone to set the drawing-room table straight.

“I wish Jane would make haste and wash us,” said a Tea-cup; “I like to be attended to properly.”

“But don’t you always feel nervous while you are being washed?” said the Tea-pot. “Why, you have not even a leg to stand upon, and you are so brittle and fragile.”

“Oh,” simpered the Tea-cup, “but then we were made to be taken care of; we were never expected to do anything for ourselves. We belong to a very old family. I can scarcely tell you how far we trace back.”

“Indeed!” said the Tea-pot. “Well, I am accustomed to a good deal of care, too, and I believe I have excellent connections—first-rate, in fact—if it were worth my while to take them up; but, to be frank with you, my dear lady, it is not. Birth is not my line; I am far too valuable to trouble myself about birth!”

The Tea-cup gave a little dissentient cough, which all the other Tea-cups echoed.

“We have a great respect for you, Mr Tea-pot; in fact, we

could not permit your presence among us unless you were of pure metal. There are so many counterfeits now-a-days, that anything genuine is of value."

The Tea-pot did not answer. He was not often so long in the kitchen, as he was always kept in the pantry, and he seemed much amused by the scene around him.

The kitchen Poker, in particular, attracted his attention. He was a tall, straight, stalwart fellow, with a large, round, shining, bald head—he never had any hair that he could remember; he hardly leaned against the fire-place, but seemed to stand bolt upright, on the alert for service. In short, he quite realized the saying, "stiff as a poker."

"Don't you get tired of standing so very upright?" said the Tea-pot, at last, for it was plain the Poker was either very well bred, or very unused to society; he would not make any advances, except to return the Tea-pot's stare with interest.

"Yes," said the Poker, bluffly, "when I think about it."

"I don't understand you," said the Tea-pot. "How can one help thinking about being tired?"

"I don't know how *you* can help it," said the Poker, in his rough, gruff voice. "I'm not a Tea-pot. The reason I can help it is because, if I'm placed upright, why, of course I must stand so, and if I were not to think about my business, I should tumble over; so how can I think about being tired?"

"Ah, now," said the Tea-cup, with an elegant drawling manner, "that may be the case with you—you are made of iron, you see—but with my extremely refined nature, I can't help feeling tired, and leaning over on one side, if I'm kept standing here long before I'm hung up; and then, if I lean a little too much, I am sure to fall over, and risk breakage."

"Well, ma'am," said the Poker, "as you say, I am made of iron, and, of course, have not much feeling, compared with your sort of folk; but it strikes me, if you tried hard, when you feel yourself slipping, you might easily recover your balance."

"By a great exertion of strength, perhaps," said the Tea-pot; "but, surely, when one is half-way down, it must be pleasanter and easier to give way altogether, than to struggle."

"Exactly so," said the Tea-cup, languidly; "such an effort would be most fatiguing to me."

"I said nothing about being pleasanter," returned the Poker; "I only said what was right, and might be done. 'Where there's a will, there's a way;' and although we may not be all made alike, still we can each fulfil our duties, one as well as the other."

"I quite agree with you," said the Fender, who had just stopped a red-hot coal from jumping on the floor.

"You are quite a sage, friend Poker," said the Tea-pot, gaping. "But a tea-leaf for duty, say I! You would make life a fine tiresome business! Why, I don't pretend that my nerves are weak, but sometimes I feel frisky, and I don't choose to let the tea out at my spout, and oftener still I feel lazy, and keep my lid firm closed when they want to tease me by opening it. The idea of always thinking about duty! Why, you might as well expect to see me always in the fine, bright coat I wear on plate-cleaning day!"

"All I know is," said the Poker, "I can't do my duty unless I think about it;" and he stood up stiffer than ever.

"Nor I," said the Fender.

"Of course, of course!" said the Warming-pan, testily, in spite of his ruddy round face. "No one can! You seem all to be talking great nonsense to-night. I suppose the reason why I do my duty so uncommonly well is because I have so much time for thinking about it. Heigho! Time was, people used to have their beds warmed every night; and now I stay here from year's end to year's end, without any chance of seeing a little life."

"Poor dear, how sad!" said the Tea-cup. "Then you've never been in the drawing-room in your life? What an existence!"

“I’ve never been in the drawing-room, either,” said the Poker, “and I lead a very jolly life, and I’ll venture to say I shall live longer than you will.”

“Well, at any rate,” said the Covers, who had been longing to join in the conversation, “we mayn’t be as valuable as some people”—and they giggled—“but at least we’ve been in the dining-room, and seen a deal of company.”

No one made any reply, for really it was very presuming of the Covers to thrust themselves in in this way; but the Tea-cups shuddered with disgust. The Tea-pot laughed at the same instant, and shook the tray.

“Oh, I’m falling!” said the Tea-cup, and, as the effort to save herself would have been far too fatiguing, she did fall.

“Here’s a pretty business!” cried Jane, the housemaid, as she came into the kitchen. “Why, here’s a Tea-cup gone and been and cracked to pieces! It ’ull never be fit to go up-stairs again. Who can have broken it? It must have been the cat.”

Hector Stickleback.



OW, my dear Hector, you really might take a little rest. We have built our nest in such a safe, out-of-the-way spot, there can be no chance of any one spying it."

"No chance, Griselda!

High-te-ti-tigh-te-ti! Do you imagine I would leave the fate of my offspring to chance? No, indeed, I should think not!" And the speaker, who was a very small, brilliant-looking Stickleback, erected his three spines fiercely, and turned red and green with offended dignity.

His quiet, grey helpmate sighed.

"There again!" said Hector, spinning round in the water, "What is the use of that unpleasant noise, Grizzy? You're always sighing. You're enough to take all the colour out of my coat, and all the stiffness out of my spines, with all this groaning misery. It's enough to make me give you something to be miserable for!"

"I'm not miserable, dear Hector, only I'm so afraid you'll get injured some day, in your valiant defence of our nest. I can't help thinking—please don't be angry, dear—that if you kept a little quiet, we should be quite as safe. We are too small and insignificant to attract attention unless we provoke it."

The Stickleback spun round nearly a dozen times.

"Insignificant, indeed! I may be small, although, mind you, Grizzly, there are many smaller, but I should like to see any three sticklebacks who are a match for me! Curious, impertinent creatures! Why, I saw one yesterday, ever so far off, looking at you as you came out of the nest, in the most insolent manner. Aha! the very sight of me was enough for him; he turned as brown as a minnow, down went his spines, and he darted to the other side of the ocean."

"Do you know, Hector, dear," said Griselda, who revenged herself for sundry bites and pricks by constant gentle doses of those amiably-spoken truths with which wives generally indemnify themselves, "my friend, Mrs. Patience, told me that some one had told her that this water we live in is not an ocean at all, only a pond."

"You ignorant, foolish creature! And what if it is called a pond? It's because it is now discovered that ponds are vaster than oceans!"

"Oh, no! On the contrary, my dear, she said that a pond was as small, compared to an ocean, as you are by the side of any of those monsters we sometimes see in the deep water."

Mr. Hector Stickleback immediately boxed his wife's ears—a very good, old-fashioned plan; it brings an impertinent wife to a proper state of subjection, by making her look foolish.

A weeping Willow-tree, that overhung the snug nest Hector had constructed among the sedges for his wife and future progeny, could not control her displeasure at this little occurrence.

"I wonder you are not ashamed," she said—and her boughs

stirred the water with excitement—"to ill-treat your poor, dear wife in such a manner!"

"It's a great pity your poor, dear husband does not discipline you a little," retorted Hector, looking all colours with rage; "for it's plain you *are* married. The old maids—bless their tender hearts!—always take part with the husbands. I'm sometimes puzzled, though," he continued, as his anger evaporated—for Grizzy had humbly retired to her nest, to finish a fat caddis-worm she had managed to secure—"I'm puzzled to make out whether it's from tenderness to the husbands, or to show them what they've missed, or to wreak their spite upon the wives for having robbed them of a chance. However, ma'am," he continued, "don't you meddle again, or you may get the worst of it, for I'm strong and fierce when I'm roused;" and he spun round and round till he made the water eddy again.

But the Willow-tree took no further notice of him.

Suddenly he spied an unlucky stickleback about six yards off. He instantly darted towards him. The other erected his spines; his skin rivalled Hector's in its scarlet and green and purple tints. They rushed fiercely at each other three times; but the fight was soon over—Hector drove his largest spine into the side of his adversary, who floated lifeless on the water.

Hector spun round in triumph, and then went to Griselda, to whom he proudly narrated his victory, asserting that the foe was at least four times as big as himself.

But Griselda sighed worse than ever.

"If you had only right on your side, dear, I should not mind; but you always begin these fights." She was going to say "provoke," but she thought better of it.

"Poor, foolish creature!" said Hector—he was too much elated to bully just then—"if I were not your guardian, I should like to know how many eggs there would be left in the nest. Generally the very sight of me is enough for these marauders; but this one was either blind or stupid—he actually came within a few

strokes of the nest. In another moment he would have beheld you ——”

“Well,” said Griselda, laughing, “what if he had? He would not have eaten me, I suppose.”

“Eaten you!” exclaimed Hector, turning quite purple; “eaten! —why, it would be much better for you to be eaten than looked at! My wife looked at by an ordinary stickleback!”

Hector seemed well-nigh stupified by the stupendous possibility.

“Jealous tyrant!” murmured the Willow.

“Now, ma’am,” said Hector, thoroughly irate at this second interference, “do mind your own business, or I shall have to teach you how to do it! If you choose to go cramming your long, languishing ringlets—grey enough just now, to be sure” (he muttered this)—“into everybody’s mouth, to gain attention, that’s your husband’s business, not mine, and I don’t care; although sometimes, if I’m swimming fast, with my mouth open, you nearly choke me. But I tell you not to meddle between me and Grizzly. If you provoke me again, I’ll bite you, and that’s as flat as a flounder!”

The Willow laughed a nasty little irritating laugh; but she secretly rejoiced that her mate, being stationary, had no power to inflict the castigation endured by Griselda.

Hector, having reduced his antagonist to silence, darted forth in search of fresh adventures.

For a long while no wayfarers passed within the limits of his watch. At length he grew impatient, and sallied further out, almost to the other side of the pond.

Presently he saw a large stickleback, evidently intent on guarding his own nest. He soon perceived Hector, and, although he did not attack him, he erected his spines, and put on his many-coloured armour.

This was enough for our pugnacious Stickleback. He flew at the other, and tried to transfix him with his spine; but the enemy ran full tilt at his nose, and they both retreated an instant, as if stunned by the violent concussion.

Hector quickly returned to the charge, and then ensued a fearful battle.

Brighter and brighter glowed their bodies—purple, gold, scarlet, and green—as they flashed, like tiny prisms, in the water. For a long time the victory seemed doubtful, but at last Hector summoned all his strength for a final blow. Down it came; but the foe evaded it, and struck so fiercely and effectually in return, that Hector's courage forsook him, and, as it did so, the doom of his race came upon him. All his colours vanished, his spines fell limp and powerless; a dull, brown fish, he fled away among the bushes and reeds that fringed the bank, his enemy not deigning to pursue him.

What was to become of him? How could he return to his nest, which he was for ever incapacitated from defending?

He hid among the rushes till evening; he wanted to break the news gently to Griselda. Poor thing! she might fret to see him shorn of his beauties—but what nonsense! What difference could it make to her?

When it grew dusk, he returned stealthily to his dwelling, trembling lest the Willow should see, and taunt him with the change in his looks; but she was so busy flirting with a Water-bur growing near her, that he escaped notice.

Griselda came out to greet him, when she heard his three accustomed taps at the entrance of the nest. Just at that moment the moon rose above the Willow-tree, and shone clear and fair upon the water.

Griselda started back. Instead of her bristling-crested, brilliant mate, she beheld a dull, quiet-looking minnow, without any spines whatever. She darted back into the nest, and shut the door in his face.

“Oh, do let me in, Grizzy, dear!”—for, strange to say, although the doom of cowardice was on him, he could not even bully his wife—“pray let me in, and I'll never be cross to you any more!”

“Let *you* in, indeed—into my Hector's nest! Get along with

you, you nasty, ugly, cowardly little wretch! *You* my Hector? No, indeed! He may bully sometimes, but he'd rather die than strike his colours! I'd rather live a widow for ever, than take up with such a little fright!" And she disappeared into the nest.

"Ah, how do you do, Mr. Stickleback?" said the Willow-tree. "I've a better memory than your wife, you see. You won't bite me now, will you, although you are so strong and fierce? Get along with you, you cowardly little bully."

Poor Hector fled away fast. Meanwhile, Mrs. Griselda had returned to her eggs, which, in due time, changed into fatherless Sticklebacks, for no more was ever heard of their recreant sire.

The Christmas Ebergreens.



CRACKLING, roaring fire, of mixed coal and beech-logs, blazed on the hearth of one of the noble old halls peculiar to our country. The fitful, ruddy light rendered its picturesque furniture in bold contrasts of light and shade; now glancing on the grand, antlered heads over the numerous doorways leading from it—now glittering in cheery sparkles, on grotesque suits of mail that had, perhaps, seen Cressy, or some such hard-fought field of bygone glory—and on the curious, ancient warlike implements suspended against the oak-panelled walls, or falling in a broad glare on the richly-gilded canopy of a stately war-horse, armed, like his knightly rider, at all points. In the ever-varying and restless firelight one seemed to believe the man and horse real, and held one's breath, expecting each instant to see him

move forward and throw his gage of defiance into the centre of the hall; but the perfect repose of the noble hounds lying in front of the fire forbade the reality of such an idea. A comfortable-looking heap of coats, cloaks, railway-rugs, maunds, with caps,

highland bonnets, &c., beside a group of rods, landing-nets, shot-pouches, and innumerable sporting requisites, recalled the mind to modern days.

At the foot of the old, quaintly-carved oak staircase lay an immense heap of Evergreens, over whose glossy leaves, of all forms and hues, the light flickered incessantly.

"I feel suffocated—Help! help! or I shall stifle!" groaned a querulous voice among the branches.

With a rustling and sundry half-suppressed grumblings, the heap whence the voice proceeded separated, and a large bunch, or rather semi-shrub of *Laurustinus*, extricated itself; it heaved a sigh of relief, and shook its poor, crushed leaves, which moreover looked rather frost-bitten, and then proceeded, in true feminine style—for *Laurustinus*, be it known, is of the weaker sex, spite of its masculine termination—to scrutinize the appearance of her neighbours.

But this could not last.

According to the best authorities, women care less for seeing than for being seen; so, erecting her only partially-opened blossoms, she bowed gracefully to an adjacent Holly-bush, and thanked him for his kind assistance.

"He may have helped you," growled some Box; "but he has run his sharp leaves into one of my arms. I don't admire charity that relieves one neighbour at the expense of another."

"Charity," murmured the deep, melodious voice of a Yew-bough near them, "should be universal, my friends; if we are all to complain of each little grievance, we shall soon resemble the foolish human beings we despise; even in those akin to us, one sees the folly of discord. Yesterday, just before the gardener lopped me from the parent stem, a mass of leaves, that the violent wind had prematurely torn from the branches of the large horse-chestnut trees, were enjoying a harmless game at leap-frog: such splendid leaps some of them made, high up in the air;—and how brightly the orange and golden-brown creatures, tinged every

here and there with vivid green, sparkled in the sunshine, as a sudden gust sent them nearly as high as the topmost boughs. At length some of the more adventurous proposed to try which could fly highest, and two soon gained pre-eminence, to the delight of a few of their more generous companions; but by far the greater number of the grovelling herd who lay below, hardly able to spring a foot from the ground, now became envious, and cried out loudly against the vanity of the active pair of leaves careering in mid-air. Finding no attention paid to their senseless clamour, they resolved to disturb the enjoyment of the other lookers-on; and raising themselves in a body, whirled furiously round and round, creating such a dusty cloud, that the gardener soon swept the whole heap away in his barrow.

The Yew sighed, and would possibly have added some moral reflections; but the Laurustinus interposed—

“Thank you for your pretty little story—somewhat prosy—don’t you think so?” This *sotto voce* to the handsome Hollybough, whose brilliant scarlet and glossy green hues had evidently the usual effect of a good-looking outside on her susceptible temperament.

But the Holly seemed more intent in meditation on the Yew’s story, than in returning the advances of his somewhat faded neighbour.

“I see,” said he at length, when there was a lull in the buzz of comments around, “you approve of pre-eminence, and disdain the vulgar notion of equal rights and privileges. You are right; we monarchs of the woodland understand these things, and should assert what is due to us——”

But here an angry murmur made him pause.

The Laurel was waving about in a most uncomfortable state of agitation, flapping its leaves one against another violently.

The melancholy voice of the Yew again interposed—

“We are gathered here,” it said, “to aid festivity; why should we not partake of the joyous feeling of the season ourselves?”

Suppose we try to find out whose qualities are most likely to add to this joyful sentiment?"

The Laurel made no reply, except by proudly shaking himself free from a heap of graceful trailing Ivy, that had approached him in its endeavours to hear what was going on.

The Holly stiffened his leaves in a well-pleased fashion, feeling no doubt in his own mind, as to whom the palm would be awarded.

A pause ensued.

No one seemed willing to claim the first place, although many thought it their due.

But the pugnacious Box could not long resist the temptation:—

"I am not a berried plant," said he, with a well-satisfied shrug, that made him appear still more round and dumpty than he really was—"but by lamplight not one of you can equal me in colour. Then, as to internal qualities, I should like to know how the *Illustrated News*, or any of its fellows, would get on without me at this season? What would become of all the pretty pictures that now wile away many a winter evening? And many of the best toys, too, just now so prized by the small children of earth, are my offspring."

The Box stopped to take breath—he was stout and puffy, you know. Before he could recover himself, the Laurel struck in:—

"I cannot think why you all hesitate; in every age, on any extra-important occasion, I have always been the chosen symbol of rejoicing."

"Stay," said the Yew, whose gentleness and venerable age seemed with all to establish his voice as umpire; "you were always adjudged to the great and successful; but, as far as my experience of human beings has taught me, these are rarely the joyful ones of earth. Christmas happiness is purely domestic, and glory and love of applause don't add much to that, I think."

A most prim, even-sided Privet-bough here cleared her throat pragmatically:—

"Our friend the Yew has touchingly alluded to domestic happi-

ness. Now, I consider myself the mainspring of that." And she pressed her lips together mysteriously.

"How!" "How!" "How!" was echoed in disdainful chorus by the gayer-looking Evergreens.

"Can any man eat his Christmas dinner in peace," replied the Privet-bough, "when he fears thieves or trespassers? And I should like to know who makes such a valuable hedge as I do? Altogether, I consider myself a pattern of neatness to any household. No gaudy colours, indeed," she continued, glancing spitefully at a graceful *Arbutus* laden with fruit near her. "I have nice, neat white flowers in spring-time, and these very sober-coloured berries afterwards; even the form of my leaves, and their trim, even stems, personify neatness: no, no, nothing at all out of regular order and routine ever adds to the happiness of life—all should be precise and formal." And she shut her lips closer than ever.

The *Arbutus* could no longer endure the sarcastic glances bestowed on her.

"I do not call myself a particularly straggling or untidy shrub," said she; "you are thinking of the Irish blood in me. Remember, neatness and elegance may be combined. I cannot help bearing flowers and fruit at the same time, which, I suppose, is out of the common way—but my fruit is so long ripening, that next year's blossoms appear before this is accomplished. It is not well to boast; but artists—and who on earth appreciate beauty so truly?—have deemed me a grace to Christmas decorations."

"You are very pretty, my dear," said the flattering Mistletoe, "and would certainly be queen in my garland, only you wither before any of us. Now, look at me." Here he bowed obsequiously round, as if trying for universal suffrage. "I last fresh for weeks; and who causes such hearty peals of laughter as I do? In baronial halls, in butteries and kitchens, I have reigned supreme for centuries as King of Merriment. Think of all the charming incidents that have taken place 'under the Mistletoe.'" And he leered impudently, especially at his female neighbours.

But the Fir, a spruce, dandified youngster, bristled up sharply.

"You are rather behind your age, friend Mistletoe, I fear—a remnant of the 'dark ages,' in fact. You are ignored now in 'society,' and banished entirely to the servants' hall. I should faint if I saw a sprig of your berries in the drawing-rooms I frequent. The Christmas Tree, my bright offspring, is a great improvement on you, methinks: and there is cruelty in your nature, too. I shudder to think of the number of innocent victims your viscid juice has helped to capture."

"Excuse me," exclaimed the Holly, very hotly; "the best bird-lime is made from my bark; so friend Mistletoe may go free on that score."

"Still," persisted the Fir, "you must own that he is old-fashioned and under-bred. We may see him in an old place like this, where things go on in an almost primeval way; but fancy a Mistletoe Bough in any of the elegant dwellings of the metropolis! The idea is below ridicule. No; as the near relation of the Christmas Tree, I undoubtedly contribute most to the happiness of the season."

The Holly grew tired of hearing all praise themselves:—

"Surely, you do not think anything so essentially a part of Christmas as my bright berries and leaves! What plum-pudding can be considered perfect without a sprig of Holly?"

"You are very bright and beautiful, and truly English," said the Yew; "but you shrivel quickly, and, for all your cheerful face, you keep friends at a distance. I do not advance my own claims. I know that, once gathered, I perish more rapidly than any of you, and form a most untidy decoration—besides, I revive sad memories. But there is one here whose voice I have not heard, and who is the fittest emblem among us of domestic bliss." And he nodded affectionately to the Ivy. "Her blossoms and fruit, though modest, are chosen by the artist more frequently than any of yours, and her graceful, trailing sprays and deep glossy leaves are found in the ornaments of every age and country. How

fondly and lovingly she shelters many an old ruin and tree from the cruel winter wind! Hard and unresponsive may be the stem to which she clings, scarce returning, even by a supporting twig, her tenderness; but still she loves on, blooming and smiling cheerfully the while, and nourishing, besides, innumerable birds and insects."

"She often kills with her kindness, though," muttered the Privet.

The Ivy bent her graceful head: "I have no self-sustaining power," said she. "What return but my love can I offer to those who support me?"

"Love, unselfish love," said the Yew, "is the true secret of all domestic happiness——"

What he might have added cannot be told, for a sound of merry laughter and voices was suddenly heard; and, attended by servants bearing lights, a gay troop of youths and maidens entered the hall, eager to commence their work of decoration.

* * * * *

At midnight—when the hall was again deserted by all but the Evergreens—who now embellished every picture-frame and panel, and hung in quaint devices on all sides—each inwardly was obliged to confess how much their union enhanced their beauty and brilliance; but the grace and harmonious blending of all they felt was due to the Ivy.

"After all," said the Mistletoe, who hung in an intricate bunch from the carved oak rafters—"After all," said he, with a jolly chuckle, "I'm the centre-bit!"

The Approach of Winter.

(THE IDEA FROM THE GERMAN.)

SEE now, with all his mighty power,
Approach the Wintry King :
Our cherished flowers are faded quite,
No warmth the sunbeams bring.
Alas ! the cold, white-bearded Man
Draws nearer every day—
Ye, blest with youth, and health, and strength,
Hasten his march to stay.

Then fasten every window close,
Let him not enter there :
He steals away our summer joys,
And chills the genial air.
See—see !—the children 'gainst him rush,
Their faces in a glow :
In vain !—each year he comes alike,
And brings us ice and snow.

He brings the long, long, dreary nights,
And shortens daylight hours ;
Wild storms of hail, and rain and mist,
And snow in fleecy showers.
And yet, how many joys he brings—
New tales we read with glee,
And, first and best of all his gifts,
The far-famed Christmas Tree.

And while we sleep, he paints a scene
Surpassing mortal power ;
Bright, glittering drops each pane adorn,
And frame an icy bower
Of flowers and leaves in silver sheen,
Like garlands gay entwined,
With mountains, rivers, castles, trees,
A landscape fair combined.

He brings us in and out-door sports,
Golf, skating, sliding too,
While in the house we chase poor Puss,
And hunt the hidden Shoe.
Snow-man he brings, and Blind-man's Buff,
And Magic Lantern bright ;
Then call the Old Man kindly in—
We'll welcome him to-night.

Come in, come in, thou Winter-Man !
We'll give thee "Cakes and Ale ;"
Come, warm thy hands, and tell us now
A stirring Christmas Tale.
A tale—a tale ! In silence deep,
We'll list with all our might,
Till midnight tolls its ghostful hour,
Then, Winter-Man, good-night !

THE END.



